

3

# [New Life+]

*Young Again in Another World*

**Mine**  
Illustrator:  
Kabocha



With all the  
pitifulness of a  
lost child, she  
clung onto him,  
her hands  
trembling and  
her eyes moist.

"PLEASE, CAN WE  
GO ALREADY?  
WHY ARE WE  
STAYING THE  
NIGHT IN A PLACE  
WHERE GHOSTS  
SHOW UP..."

[New Life+]3  
*Young Again in Another World*





"I WAS INFORMED OF A VISIT BY HUMANS, NOT A CREATURE MADE OF FAT BLOBS."

"I DON'T EXPECT YOU TO BE ABLE TO TELL THE DIFFERENCE. AFTER ALL, YOU ELVES ARE SO FLAT YOU CAN BARELY TELL YOUR OWN GENDERS APART."

Crpire Path  
Tiphereth

She greets Renua and his friends when they arrive in the elf kingdom and acts as their guide. Rona and her get along extremely poorly.



"UH OH. THIS  
MIGHT BE A  
PROBLEM..."

As the haze of vapor gradually faded, he caught a glimpse of the forest beyond the wall of white. Branches did not sway. Leaves did not rustle. The trees and grasses, and probably every animal and monster they sheltered, were frozen in place, locked into a motionless winter wonderland.



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# **Prologue: The Search for a Home Came First, or So It Was Told**

Renya hated taking on debt.

More generally, he disliked the act of buying something with money that one didn't have. Of course, paying with imaginary money tended to be frowned upon, so said buyer would have to borrow money from somewhere else. It was the nerve of these people, using money they didn't own, that rubbed him the wrong way. However, even he conceded that there was a time and place for such a thing.

That time was undoubtedly now.

The total amount of reward money they received from their dungeon campaign earlier came to 100 gold. They gave half to Azu's party, so Renya's party was left with 50. This arrangement, however, met with fierce opposition from Azu, who argued that they were complete dead weights when it came to defeating the demon, so they had no claim to the dungeon core's reward. Renya did not back off either, insisting that they split the reward equally. Ultimately, Azu caved and Renya emerged the victor of their stubbornness contest.

From Renya's perspective, they had all put their lives on the line and braved the same danger together, so both parties deserved an equal reward, and Azu was wrong to refuse his share.

"We didn't even function as meat shields, you know?!" Azu exclaimed as he stepped closer.

"So?" responded Renya in as flat a voice as he could

muster. "I think this is appropriate, and that's all that matters. Or what? Are you going to claim that I could have taken on that demon all by myself? Just so you know, Azu, there is such a thing as too much flattery."

He took care to appear business-like, keeping all traces of emotion out of his voice and expression. Otherwise, Azu would realize there was more to this than a simple negotiation between two parties. He had become fairly good friends with the mage, and the process of keeping up a poker face in front of him was not at all enjoyable. Nevertheless, he willed every muscle in his face to help keep his look blank. After a short period of mutual staring, Azu broke the silence.

"Fine... We'll take it this time... Sorry," he murmured, lowering his head in a deep bow. Then, he declared that he had to inform his party members about the reward and walked away.

After seeing Azu off, Renya let out a long sigh. It was obvious that Azu's party needed the money more than his. Even if they wanted to continue adventuring, his four guards had lost almost all their equipment. Buying everything new would cost them far more than what they earned this time. Similarly, if they quit adventuring, they would need a sum of money to keep them going until they found their next job, and if that job was starting a business, the money had to last them until the business became profitable. In either case, the more money they had, the better.

In comparison, while his party's objective in taking jobs was to make money, there was no urgency to their endeavor. So long as they could pay for food and lodging, everything else could be left for later. Knowing this, he would have been fine giving all of their reward to Azu, but his position as leader of his own party and the lack of a decent reason aside from sheer pity prevented him from forcing the issue. In the end, he settled on splitting the reward half-and-half as a compromise.

Moving on to other matters now.

Out of the 50 gold that Renya received, Shion and Rona each requested only 2 gold each and told him to hold on to the remainder, leaving him with 46 gold. As he strolled through the streets of the city, wondering what his current assets could buy, his eyes lingered on a place that resembled a real estate office. Posted in the office was a piece of paper displaying a certain property that was on sale.

The property was situated in the Commercial District. Once occupied by the owner of a sizeable business who used it as a combined storefront-and-residence, it was somewhat removed from the city's center. Perhaps due to its remote location, it was a robust structure made of stone that boasted not only an expansive garden but also a workshop and storehouse. On top of that, the old storefront section of the house faced the street. It was the ideal property. The problem was the price.

The place was selling for 80 gold. With a 40-gold down payment, he could pay the rest in installments, the specifics of which could be negotiated with a large degree of lenience for the buyer. Renya was absolutely clueless about average market prices, but he remembered hearing that properties like these would cost him at least a platinum. Granted, it depended on the size of the building and plot. Based on what he could glean from the data, though, this place — the word “big” alone seemed insufficient to describe its size — should have been worth even more than a platinum.

No matter how he cut it, 80 gold definitely was on the cheap side. He couldn't buy the place outright, but he had enough on hand for the down payment. Though he hated the thought of taking out a loan, this was a chance he simply could not pass up.

“Is there a property that interests you?”

The way Renya stared at the poster on the wall probably tipped the salesperson off. Figuring he had a potential sale

on his hands, the middle-aged man approached Renya with a meek smile.

"This property... doesn't it seem a bit too cheap?"

"Ah, you mean this one..."

The man's expression clouded as soon as he glanced at the paper Renya pointed at. That look was all Renya needed to figure out what was going on: this property had some issues. The man leaned toward him and, in an ominous voice, whispered in his ear...

"There's something about this property, you see..."

"Yeah?"

"It's in the air. You can feel it... the *malice*."

For a moment, Renya's mind went blank. He wasn't sure how to respond. As though propelled by some subconscious intent, his hands moved by themselves, reaching for the katana that hung from his waist. The sight of his sudden gesture caused the salesperson to lurch backward in a panic. His momentum carried him past his point of balance and he toppled to the ground. He hit the ground in a roll and, with a surprising amount of dexterity, managed to flip himself into a prostrated position, ending his tumble in a touchdown of forehead to ground.

"I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. It was a joke!"

"...Yeah, I figured as much."

Praising himself for the restraint he displayed, Renya slowly released his grip on the katana and lowered his hand. He had come *this* close to running the guy through. Had he actually done so, he doubted he would have felt any guilt, but he would have to deal with being arrested for breaking the law. The shock of hearing such cheesy rubbish — the kind that nobody in his original world would ever attempt anymore — in this entirely new world was too much for his unprepared ears, and he had reacted almost entirely reflexively.

"B-But, I must point out that it wasn't complete nonsense..."

“Hngh?”

“If there’s one thing this property is known for, it’s the rumor that it’s cursed.”

The person who had lived in that house was a wealthy merchant. He had a beautiful wife and a clever child. Many employees served under him, and he ran an expansive business that was considered one of, if not the largest of Kukrika. He paid his employees generously and looked after them with care, so there was never any shortage of people who came to his home seeking to work at his store. He was also well-regarded by fellow merchants, and it seemed that his store would continue to flourish for a long time to come. Then, everything changed.

It happened a few years ago. There was an incident in which multiple women of a young age went missing in the city of Kukrika. Girls in their late teens simply went missing one after another. The city guards worked day and night searching everywhere for the missing girls, and a notice was sent out cautioning women to avoid walking alone.

Eventually, the investigators of the incident happened upon one element that all the cases shared: all the victims had either been working at the formerly-mentioned merchant’s store or been interviewed for a position. They found the thread that connected all the victims. Once they realized, the guards immediately rushed to the merchant’s house for questioning. When they arrived, they saw...

“They saw?”

“The very sight that surfaced in your mind right now,” said the salesperson in a low, hushed tone. Presumably, it was for effect, as the story had reached its climax.

Renya was not impressed in the least; nothing about the story grabbed him. The guy sounded like just another serial killer. What was so special about him? Sure, it was a tragic story, but if he started giving examples of similar incidents from his original world, they’d be here all day. If that was all

it took for a place to be cursed, his whole freaking world would have been cursed multiple times over. Besides, if there were ghosts roaming around the guy's house, they should have been popping up in the dozens.

"Well," said the man, who seemed rather disappointed by his potential client's profound disinterest, "so goes the story about the place, anyway."

"That's all there is to it? Just a story?" said a distinctly unamused Renya.

"Ah, well, as I've heard, they really do appear..." The man lowered his voice and tried for the ominous air again, but Renya was not interested in playing along.

"What's 'they'?"

"Ghosts, apparently. So far, every one of our clients who moved in to that property has terminated their contract, claiming they see them as soon as night falls."

This time, Renya found himself genuinely surprised by the man's words, which served as a stark reminder to him that things truly were different here. It seemed that in this world, unresolved grudges and grievances really could give rise to ghosts. His memories of his previous world remained missing, but he was fairly sure he had never come across any ghosts or spiritual beings there. This wasn't a baseless assumption; until now, he didn't believe they existed at all. Had he ever experienced a ghostly encounter, he should have at least believed in their existence. The fact that he didn't implied no such encounter ever occurred.

"Do those ghosts only come out at night?"

"Yes, that appears to be the case."

Apparently, some things didn't change. Even here, he wasn't going to behold any ghosts strutting their ethereal stuff in bright daylight.

"Can I take a look first? If I don't find anything wrong with the place, I intend to purchase it."

Renya eyed the poster again — a bargain-priced property with a past history of ghost sightings — and found himself,

of all things, fascinated. In fact, he had half a mind to put his money down right then and there. Of course, he wasn't yet sure if they truly appeared or not, and he still had the good sense to realize that if they did, he needed to first ascertain how dangerous they were.

"I see..." said the man with a nod, "we do at times meet clients with... more exotic tastes such as yourself. In such cases, we do allow for a one-night stay, during which the client may have a look-over of the property. Do note, however, that no furniture or bedding will be provided. It's in the same state as the merchant left it. Will that be fine?"

"At least clean the place... You're trying to sell it, right?"

"We'd love to, but it's too creepy and nobody wants to go in."

"Huh. Fine. On a side note, what happened to that merchant?"

"Of course, they arrested him and brought him to trial. He was sentenced to death. But, so that the souls of those women so cruelly murdered may rest in peace..." The man paused, presumably for dramatic effect, then lowered his voice again and continued in a hushed tone, "They took him to the mansion's garden. There, they beheaded him."

The man laughed, his voice meant to be low and unsettling. Even now, he was still determined to add a touch of horror to his story. Unfortunately, Renya, who was entirely uninvested, started speaking with an air of total nonchalance and ruined the man's efforts to create some atmosphere.

"Damn, the clean up must have been a nightmare. I don't know how people do beheadings in this world, but it's harder than it looks. The neck's wrapped in muscle and the bone's thick, so it's fairly tough. If you swing wide, there's a chance you end up hitting the shoulder or the back. And if some fat guy shows up, it's like 'where the hell is your neck, even?' and it degenerates into a farce sometimes. Also, it doesn't matter if you use a sword or an axe, if you can't lop it off

with one swing, the convict's going to suffer. I've heard about cases where a shoddy executioner hacked at a convict's neck a bunch of times and still couldn't cut through, and the guy was just writhing in pain the whole time... I mean, you could argue that was part of the atonement process, but imagine if it were you in that situation. Now there's a thought that'll keep you up at night, huh? The reliable way to do it is to get them onto the beheading stand, hold an axe over their neck, and slam the axe down with a hammer. That way, even a novice can do it in one go. However, if the guy swinging the hammer hesitates, the axe can get lodged in the neck halfway through, and then you'll be in a pickle. Did you know that?"

As Renya rattled off his encyclopedic knowledge of the intricacies of beheading techniques, the man's face turned deathly pale — far paler than from any ghost story — and scurried to the back of the store to get Renya the keys to the property. With the grin of a bully, Renya called out after the man.

"Where I'm from, they say that if you bury a dead body under a tree, beautiful flowers will blossom there. That guy's body isn't buried in the garden, is it?"

"How the heck would I know? Just take your key and go already!" shrieked the man.

He who told the ghost story was scared out of his wits. Renya shook his head and smiled a little. The irony was not lost on him.

# **Chapter 1: Time for a Property Viewing, or So It Was Told**

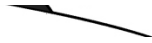
“We’re going... to look at a house... that we might call home?”

The light faded from Shion’s eyes. She stared at Renya with the look of someone who had just been plunged into the depths of despair. It was as if Hell itself had been loosed upon the world, and she was witnessing it firsthand. She visibly deflated as she leaned backward and slumped into her chair. Renya tilted his head to the side, wondering just what part of his announcement had been so utterly soul-crushing.

“The place has, uh... a bit of history, so we’re going to stay there for a night and check it out. Is there... something wrong?”

“I see... This day... came so fast...”





The sight of Shion hanging her head and murmuring into the ground was baffling to him. At a complete loss as to what to do, he turned his attention to Rona, who watched the proceedings in the seat beside Shion and made no attempt to involve herself. With evening approaching, there would soon be an influx of people looking to eat dinner. More people meant more eyes, and he didn't want weird rumors popping up about how he made a girl at his table act like her world just ended.

"Hey, you have any idea why she's like this?"

"Don't you have an inkling?" Rona questioned him back. In response, he tried searching through his memories, but nothing came to mind.

"Nope. Sorry, I've got nothing."

"Shion's worried that now that you've bought your home, you're going to disband the party."

With Rona's tip, the pieces in his mind finally fell into place. When Shion had first asked him to join her party, he accepted and told her it was because he needed money to buy a permanent place to reside. At the time, she suggested that if they bought a home, the whole party could live there together, but he put off the matter, claiming they could discuss it when the time came. Apparently, Shion had been thinking that if they lived together, then she could keep the party together after he acquired a place to stay. Thanks to him shelving the discussion for later, however, he instilled in her the concern that he would leave the party once the time came.

"Since when did she take to me so much? I have no recollection of this ever happening."

"Well, let's see. You're a veritable one-man army, you can cook, you have a decent personality, and you look all right. You care about your friends, and if they need money, you might as well be a walking coin purse to them. I'm pretty sure that puts you squarely in the eligible bachelor zone. In fact, can I get in on the action, too? You can have both of us

for the price of one,” said Rona, her casual tone at complete odds with the sheer lunacy of what she just proposed.

“You’re not stray kittens, damn it,” answered Renya with a grimace. “I’m not going to just pick you up and take you home, okay? Also, I’m pretty sure I already said I’m all about the money.”

“Oh, yes, of course. You certainly demonstrated that when you gave half your bounty to Azu without batting an eye.”

“That was... totally justified! Azu was entitled to—”

“Objection. At the time, Azu’s party was officially entitled to only 12 gold. The remaining 38 was comprised of exactly half the reward for the core’s destruction, the profits from its sale, and the payment for assisting the guild. All your earnings, Renya.”

He had no answer to Rona’s sharp retort. There was no doubt that normally, it was only sensible for him to share the earnings with his own party members, Shion and Rona. Though it was an act of sympathy, he couldn’t deny that he felt a little guilty about giving away half their reward to Azu’s party. Words failed him, and as he awkwardly fumbled for a response, Rona grinned.

“There’s nothing wrong with being generous with your money; that’s a good thing. And it’s not like I’m scolding you, so cheer up already. Now, let’s move on to more important matters, like doing something about her.” She pointed at Shion, who did not seem to hear a word they said. “I trust you know what to say?”

Would there ever be a day when he managed to take a point off this woman? He wasn’t really sure. With such thoughts swirling in the back of his mind, he turned to Shion and said to her what he hoped was the correct answer to Rona’s question.

“It’s the place our party’s going to call home. Since we’re all going to be living there together, do you want to come take a look as well, Shion?”

“Huh?”

Shion looked up at him with empty, lifeless eyes. They wandered a little before settling in his direction. A period of silence ensued, during which the meaning of his words slowly sank in. Then, color returned to her face and her dead eyes flared back to life.

"Live... together... R-Right, of course. It's where our party's going to call home, after all."

"Yeah, so it wouldn't make sense for me to go alone. You should come along. Do you have some time? I'm going there right after this."

"No problem. I have time. I'll *make* time. We're leaving soon, right? Since we're staying a night, I'll go prepare my things. Wait for me."

She leapt to her feet and dashed off toward her room to pack her luggage. He watched her giddy form disappear into a doorway, noting that the despondent, empty-husk-of-a-human Shion he saw moments before had all but disappeared. Now, she gave him the distinct impression of — an impolite thought, certainly — a puppy about to be taken on a walk.

"What about you, Rona? I assume ghosts and stuff fall under the specialty of the priesthood."

"As long as you're there, it'll probably be fine. I find the thought of staying a night at an abandoned house extremely unappealing, so count me out," she said, looking away with a hmph.

Renya narrowed his eyes and kept them trained on the side of her face. She glanced back in his direction and, when she saw him staring, hurriedly looked away again.

"What're you scheming?"

"Nothing... On a completely unrelated note, you know how they say a man and a woman are more likely to have feelings for each other when they're standing on a suspension bridge or a battlefield? Do you believe that?"

"Damn it, what're you getting at? Hey, stop turning away! Look at my eyes when you talk!"

He grabbed her shoulders and tried to get her to turn around and face him, but she adamantly refused, craning her neck as far as she could the other way. Their tussle continued all the way until Shion came back with her set of sleeping gear.

Rona never did look him in the eyes.

"A night with Renya... Just the two of us. I like where this is going," Shion said to herself quietly.

Renya and Shion were making their way toward the storied property. Rona had refused to come, and Renya didn't know where anything was in Kukrika, so Shion naturally took the lead on their journey. Shion did not don her usual battle wear; instead, she was dressed in men's clothes that were navy blue from top to bottom. When Renya asked why she wasn't wearing something like a skirt, she curtly replied, "Because it doesn't suit me."

She had brought a longsword for insurance, but she was otherwise lightly equipped, carrying only a sleeping bag and a pouch that held her personal effects. As for Renya, he also had no intention of gearing up just to check out a property in town, so he wore a brown top and brown bottom fixed by a sword belt with the katana attached. He had stuffed all the other luggage into his inventory beforehand, so matters of food and sleep were already taken care of.

"It should be somewhere around here..." murmured Shion as she came to a stop, her eyes still on the map they got from the real estate office. "Maybe it's... that?"

She pointed at a tall fence, beyond which they could see the corner of a building. As they approached for a better look, the structure gradually came into view, dimly lit by the fading evening sun. The surrounding fence, so tall that they needed to tilt their heads back to see the top, was covered by myriad dark forms, long and snakelike. On closer inspection, it was revealed that they were the vines of some unknown plant, which had grown so dense that they hid the

fence itself from view. The gate at the entrance, long since untended, was in a state of rusty disrepair. Renya inserted the key from the real estate office into the lock and pushed. Slowly, the gate swung inwards, grating noisily against the ground the whole way.

A cobblestone path led from the gate, flanked by the garden on both sides. Long years of neglect had taken their toll here as well, as weeds grew wildly throughout and filled the space with a vibrant but messy collage of green. Trees dotted the lot. What might once have been proud displays of well-pruned beauty now stood strong and untamed. Their long branches grew freely and haphazardly, unimpeded by the will of man.

"This... looks like it's going to take some work before anybody can move in."

"Well, it comes with the price, I guess."

Renya sighed. The outside being in such terrible shape suggested that the inside would fare little better. Purchasing the house and land was only the beginning. This place was going to need a lot of repairs and renovation before it was habitable, and that was going to chew through a lot more money. It was clear that he wasn't going to be living the high life after buying the house; he was going to be working his ass off trying to make more money. Shion seemed to share his thoughts, but contrary to his gloomy expression, she wore a look of sheer glee.

"Just so we're clear, I'm not basing my decision to keep the party together on the amount of work this repair job is going to take."

"I never said you did."

"Huh... All right, then."

After trading a few quips, the two found themselves standing at the entrance to the house. The door before them was thick and solid. He took out the key to the house, pushed it into the lock, and twisted. The lock opened with a heavy clank, and the door slowly creaked open. Once they

walked through the doorway, neither of them were surprised to find the inside shrouded in darkness. There were no lamps, and the dim evening glow barely even lit the windows it passed through. A vast and unsettling emptiness stretched out before them. Shion couldn't help but lean in and pull on Renya's shoulder.

"It's... pretty dark."

"Well, yeah. Because there are no lights. Hold on a second."

He gave the hand on his shoulder a few reassuring pats before stepping into that emptiness. Then, he raised his right hand and gave it a quick flick.

"Illuminate."

Orbs of mana flickered to life in the murky darkness, glowing with an intense, but heatless white light. There were a total of sixteen, and they bathed the area in their radiance, revealing it to be an entrance hall.

"I set their duration to twelve hours. It's probably fine for the entrance to stay bright until tomorrow morning."

"Hm, right."

Shion agreed with a nod. It seemed perfectly reasonable, but that was only because she had no knowledge of magecraft. Otherwise, she should have been gaping at the ridiculously unusual sight before her.

The amount of mana expended by magecraft correlated with the spell's strength and duration of action, and it was possible to calculate through simple multiplication. Orbs generated by Illuminate only lasted for about ten minutes. He had queued up twelve hours' worth. Moreover, he had sixteen instances of this going at the same time. Six times twelve times sixteen equals one thousand one hundred and fifty-two. In other words, with a flick of his hand, he just burned through enough mana to cast a normal Illuminate 1152 times.

The sheer mana consumption would have easily knocked a regular mage out cold. Were Azu or Caryl present, the

sight would have blown their minds. Unfortunately, its significance was lost on Shion, who knew less than nothing about such things. The extent of her appreciation for his extraordinary feat was “Well, I’m glad it’s bright now.” Renya did not feel like it was anything to boast about either, so the specifics ultimately went unexplained.

Ample illumination revealed the entrance hall to be built in a wellhole style that joined the first and second floors, and the staircase to the second was directly in front of them. A number of rooms surrounded them on the first floor, and they turned out to be a guest room, a dining room with kitchen attached, a storehouse, another storehouse, and a workshop. The section that faced the street was the storefront. Apparently, the storefront and workshop each claimed one of the storehouses for themselves.

Up on the second floor, there were three bedrooms, a large bathroom, a study, a living room, and a children’s bedroom. The third floor was the attic, and it seemed to have been used as a glorified closet.

Renya proceeded to spam twelve-hour Illuminates throughout the house, putting orbs up in every room he entered. Only the bedrooms were spared. In the end, almost every corner of the building was aglow and the whole place was bright as day. Each orb he created cost 72 times more mana than usual, and he was throwing them out like they were chump change. At this point, even the magecraft-challenged Shion started noticing that something seemed strange.

“Hey, Renya, how come you’re putting up light orbs everywhere?”

“Hm? Oh, I guess I didn’t tell you.” He scratched his head and grimaced a little, figuring he probably should have explained beforehand. “Apparently, this house is haunted. Like, people see ghosts around here.”

“...Huh?”

“There’s some story about how the merchant who used to

own this place turned out to be a serial killer. And it's said that ghosts show up here. Speaking of which, I forgot to ask what kind of ghosts they are... Those of the murdered? Or is it the ghost of that merchant who was beheaded in the yard? I mean, I don't really care either way, but will they still come out if it's this bright?"

"Gho... Ghosts?"

"Yeah. What about them?"

A glance at Shion revealed that she was slowly drawing in a breath. He had a pretty good idea what she was going to do next, so he stuck his fingers in his ears and grit his teeth.

For the briefest of moments, there was nothing. Then, it came.

The world itself seemed to tremble amidst the piercing scream. It emanated from Shion, passed through the walls, and echoed throughout the entire property before fading into the night sky.

"Nope! Nope nope nope nope nope! No way! Come on, Renya, can we leave? Please..."

She clutched at his right shoulder with both hands and looked up at him with wide, desperate eyes. With all the pitifulness of a lost child, she clung onto him, her hands trembling and her eyes moist. It was a sight that would have tugged at the heartstrings of anyone who called himself male, but Renya was too distracted trying to pry off the iron grip of her hand that was currently threatening to crush his shoulder and therefore took little notice.

"Please, can we go already? Why are we staying the night in a place where ghosts show up..."

"That's the whole point. I said we're here to check this place out, didn't I? Being ghosts, they probably only come out at night, so how else are we supposed to see them? We have to be here when it's night. If you want to leave, you can just go back to the inn by yourself."

"How am I supposed walk alone at night after hearing a story like that, you monster!" she exclaimed in a fit of

desperate, dread-fueled rage.

Immediately, he started regretting bringing her along. With that said, though, he was partly to blame for not explaining the situation to her beforehand, so he couldn't scold her outright. He was also surprised by how poorly Shion handled things like ghosts and tales of the paranormal. They had, after all, ventured into a dungeon and stared down zombies whose flesh was literally melting off their bodies. Those seemed many times scarier in both appearance and potential threat compared to ghosts, which might or might not exist — they weren't even sure yet. When he brought up the issue with her, her reply was swift and firm.

“Because you can't stab a ghost with a sword, obviously!”

In his mind, Renya opened the file where he kept his opinions of the people he knew, flipped to Shion's page, and under the entry that read, “A few cards short of a full deck,” added another line: “Failed physics.” Then, he proceeded to explore the rest of the house with an unwilling Shion in tow, who pulled on his sleeve like her very life depended on it and loudly pleaded with him to leave.

The entrance to the first floor was opposite the storefront, which faced the street. One of the two storehouses could only be entered from the side of the store, and access to the other was similarly restricted to the adjoining workshop. The layout of the guest room remained the same as when it was last inhabited, but below the thick layer of dust and grime that had accumulated over the years, its furnishings lay decayed and worm-eaten. Though it might be cheaper to clean and restore them to their original state, he decided that it was simply easier to dispose of everything and start over with newly-purchased furniture. The same could be said of the dining room and the assortment of cookware that had been left behind; he wasn't keen on reusing hand-me-downs from a convicted serial killer. As for the kitchen, it was equipped with a number of contraptions, each of which was

rigged with a dizzying assortment of mana crafts that were sure to fetch a handsome price on the market. According to Shion, with a sufficient supply of manastones, they would allow him to produce both water and fire with the flick of a finger, even going so far as to control their intensity at will. It elicited an impressed nod from Renya, who noted that this world was conveniently high-tech in the strangest of places sometimes.

He stepped into the workshop and discovered that it was no slouch either. A furnace that ran on mana stones could be used for smithery, and the surrounding cupboards and cabinets provided plenty of storage space for medicines and materials. Heavy-duty work counters rounded off the setup, and the whole place was, barring some cleaning that had to be done, in perfect working condition.

"You think... somebody was killed on this work counter?" asked Shion, her voice tinged with dread. The counter was indeed wide enough for a person to lie down on it, but he shook his head.

"That seems unlikely. If the guy actually did something like that, I'll be sure to give his ghost a good scolding when it shows up."

The work counter was a hallowed place; it was where a craftsman went about his craft. Those who would desecrate such a space with unseemly acts would receive no mercy from him.

"...Can you even scold a ghost?"

"No idea. It's not like I've tried before."

Up on the second floor, there were three bedrooms. They were used by the merchant and his wife, their children, and any potential guests, respectively. The furniture and beds in these rooms were likewise untouched, but he didn't want to keep stuff that had been used by other people. They were pretty dirty too, so he flagged everything as garbage.

An expansive bathroom held a luxurious bathtub made of marble. As expected, it employed a water-delivery system

that was powered by mana stones, and it even had a shower attached. Despite the long period of neglect, the system remained in very good condition.

"It's nice that the bathtub is big. We can all get in together," said Shion as she peeked out from behind him.

"Yeah. Except we're not going to do that."

She was still clinging to him as if she were hiding from something, but the sight of the bathtub set her eyes aflame.

"Really? You don't want to catch a glimpse of Rona in the bath? Just so you know, they're an eyeful normally, but they're even more of an eyeful when they're wet."

"I have no idea what you're talking about, but I'm pretty sure I value my life and sanity more."

While he was fairly certain that she wouldn't make much of a fuss even if he did engage in acts of voyeurism, he was also fairly certain that she would use that fact to her advantage in other ways.

"Wh-What about mine? I'm actually pretty proud of them, personally..."

"Okay, one of these days, we're going to have to sit you down, and we're going to have to talk about *expectations*," he said, exasperated but not oblivious to the fact that her neatly-tied hair afforded him a generous and not-entirely-unprovocative view of her rose-hued skin. Her lips curved into a sly grin. He sighed; the thought must have shown on his face.

The two of them circled through the remaining rooms: the study, the living room, and the children's room. These, however, had nothing of note. None of the remaining furnishings were in a state suitable for continued use, and the study was in such bad shape that most of its contents — books, for example — were entirely gone.

After making the rounds through the inside of the house, Renya went to the garden and began to cut away weeds. Eventually, he cleared out enough space to make dinner. He could have used the equipment in the kitchen, but it

technically didn't belong to him yet. Also, neither he nor Shion had the necessary manastones on them. Naturally, preparing dinner would then require them to start a fire themselves, and that had to be done outside.

After producing some firewood from his inventory and putting it in a pile, Shion lit them with a spell. Once the embers grew large enough, he placed a shallow fry pan on top. Then, he took wheat flour and a powder made by crushing some sort of dried corn-like crop, mixed them in water, and poured it onto the pan. As he cooked it, it became something that resembled a thin flatbread. He repeated the process a few more times, producing a couple more pieces, before dripping some oil onto the same pan and throwing in a bundle of vegetables and bite-sized meat. As he stir-fried these, he sprinkled in salt, alcohol, and a dab of honey. Had he some sesame oil and soy sauce and mirin cooking wine, it would have really brought out the yakiniku flavor, but alas, it was an empty hope. He consoled himself with the thought that he would eventually figure out a way to make his own. Once the contents of the pan had been thoroughly fried, he split it into two large plates, which already held some leafy greens that he had washed with water in advance. Finally, he put the greens on the flatbread, added his stir-fried meat dish on top, and rolled it all into a wrap. Complementing this was a plate of mustard — to be added as one saw fit — and some light wine. Most of the flavor would come from the stuffing, which was heavier in seasoning than usual to offset the fact that it would be wrapped with greens in flatbread.

Shion mimicked his steps and was soon holding her own stuffing-filled wrap. As she leaned in to take a bite, she gave a heartfelt comment.

“You really don't skimp out when it comes to food, do you Renya?”

In general, adventurers did not cook while they were on the move. It was true that they preferred carrying less

luggage. It was also true that few of them knew how to cook in the first place. A bag of salt and a spit was what passed for cooking in most parties, and most would never even think of attempting to boil, fry, or steam their food. Shion, like all the other adventurers, was clueless when it came to cooking and had naturally gotten used to foods that were simple to prepare and quick to eat. That, however, had changed.

"After being around you for a while, I don't think I can go back to living like before," she said as she held the wrap in both hands and politely nibbled at it. In the light of the fire, faint shadows dancing across tender cheeks, her smile seemed a touch forlorn.

Renya opened his mouth to respond, but no words came. He gaped awkwardly for a second before remembering the wrap in his hand. He turned to it and took a bite; it gave his mouth something to do. The sight amused Shion and the shadow vanished from her smile. She began to laugh, thinking her comment had embarrassed him, but suddenly flinched. Her smile stiffened. Then, her face rapidly paled.

"What's the matter?" Renya asked, quickly realizing that something was wrong.

"Did someone... just laugh?"

He had cooked outside, so they ate outside as well. Seeing that neither of them wanted to sit on the ground, he had brought out some chairs, which they were sitting in right now. All was quiet. No one seemed to be near. Other than the house itself, their only company were the rampant weeds scattered throughout the garden.

"Are you sure you weren't just hearing things?"

"I don't know... but it really did sound like someone la—"

A laugh. They both heard it this time. It was the voice of a young girl, thin but sinister.

All the color drained from Shion's face. Renya cautiously scanned the surroundings. There was no wind, no fluttering of leaves or grasses, no sound at all, save for the slow,

rolling laughter of a young girl's voice that echoed in the otherwise silent garden.

"Re-Renya..."

"Geez, don't start whimpering."

The laugh grew louder and louder as it turned into a maniacal cackle. Shion, who looked like she was mere moments away from breaking into a wailing sob, leapt toward Renya and clung to his left arm. Despite her frantic scramble, however, she did not drop the wrap in her hand. Surprised that she managed such a feat, he gave her a pat of approval, then wrapped his left arm around her waist and pulled her in to reassure her.

"It's here, Renya! The ghost! The ghost is here!"

She had a death grip on his shoulder and was shaking his arm with all her strength, but there was too much difference in either their strength or their body weight; despite her furious shaking, he stood perfectly still, not budging an inch. It was like a kitten thrashing against a giant tree.

"Hmmm? I guess it does sound like one..." he murmured in a perfectly level voice amidst a violent cacophony of sound and motion. There was hysterical laughter in his ears and a flailing Shion in his arm. "But all it's doing is laughing. At this rate, it'll just be a really noisy nuisance."

His words entered Shion's ears and did a couple of laps inside her head before she finally parsed what they meant.

"Huh?"

Shion stopped desperately pressing her face against his shoulder and, with an expression of disbelief, looked up at him. He stared back at her. With his right hand, he threw the last little bit of his wrap into his mouth and munched on it ever so slowly. He kept staring at her for a little longer, wondering what it was he said that baffled her so much, before continuing.

"I mean, to be fair, it *is* going to be hell trying to sleep through this at night, so we probably need to do something about it, but it's basically harmless otherwise, right?"

Once he declared the ghost to be the equivalent of a particularly noisy neighbor, the laughing stopped. Maybe it heard what he said. At the same time, swishing sounds came from all around the garden. Soon after, they were assaulted by a barrage of debris that hurtled through the air. He drew his katana with his right hand — his left was still holding Shion, and she had her eyes firmly shut — and slapped down the flying objects with the back of his blade.

“So, first it laughs up a storm. Then, it starts chucking stones? What did they call these again? Poltergeists or something?”

The objects he knocked down rolled along the ground a few times before coming to a stop and revealing themselves to be the same small stones that were scattered here and there in the garden. They were neither special nor particularly threatening.

“All right. What’s next?” he said as he shot a questioning glance at a patch of tall weeds.

A number of pale white figures appeared, ghostly forms wavering as they rose up through the grass. Their shifting faces were hazy and indistinct. One of them emitted a moaning wail that dripped with malice for the living.

Then, its head promptly burst into a cloud of ethereal fragments and disintegrated. In its place was the cusp of a silver blade that glinted in the darkness. Beyond its hilt was Renya’s outstretched right arm. In his left was Shion, whose eyes remained stubbornly closed. Even with her body in tow, however, the speed of his dash was unhampered. This was especially impressive, considering he was walking on the garden’s untended earth. Normally, a person’s legs would almost certainly have gotten tangled in the swirling tendrils of weeds.

“Well. So much for ‘you can’t stab a ghost with a sword,’” he uttered in a somewhat disappointed tone, showing absolutely no interest in the glowing white form that was melting into the air. If anything, he was more interested in

what he held in his arm. After taking a moment to appreciate the soft aroma that drifted from Shion's body along with the sensation of her rubbing against his left side, he turned to the countless ghostly forms that had appeared and brandished his katana at them.

"Well then, since we're here to do some cleaning, might as well start by taking out the trash!"

Shion was not exactly short, and she had a reasonably well-built frame with a good amount of muscle. Nevertheless, Renya could hoist her up to his side with his left arm without much effort at all. Part of the reason might have been the fact that she was carrying nothing but a longsword. In any case, it was a stroke of luck for him that she wasn't wearing armor, because with each swing, step, and turn, various parts of their bodies came into rather intimate contact with each other. To put it more specifically, breasts were touched, midriffs were brushed, and hips were nudged. A kaleidoscope of sensations were his to enjoy, and enjoy them he did. How glad he was that Rona wasn't present; with no need to worry about witnesses, he could indulge to his heart's content.

Fortunately, the fight took place in the garden, which offered ample room for movement. He could run, jump, and spin without minding his surroundings. Taking full advantage of his freedom, he filled the entirety of the garden's vast space with his presence. The pale human forms never even managed to utter a peep. Those he dashed past were sundered in two from shoulder to waist. Those in his way were skewered in rows. Others lost their heads before being parted down the middle. Yet more simply dissipated where they stood, sliced into too many pieces to count. Chaos ruled the garden that night, playing out its entropic symphony of violence. Every passing measure was punctuated by the scattering of more ethereal forms.

If they were the souls of the women who were murdered

here — vengeful spirits shackled to this ground — they surely would have bemoaned their choice to show themselves this night. If they were the merchant who was beheaded here — fragmented remnants of his accursed soul — he surely would have questioned whether he sinned so deeply to justify such a cruel fate. Renya, however, neither knew nor cared what they were. He had but one sole goal: to cut them all down.

“Oh, man... this isn’t good...”

He blindly swung his arms this way and that, hewing down whatever they touched. Both blade and Shion twirled through the air. Then he stopped, cast his head back, and sent a bout of howling laughter up into the night sky.

“Why, I do believe we have a problem.”

Renya thought he heard the shrill twangs of muscles all through his body, their fibers stressed to their limit. They cried out in agony, protesting their abuse. It was the sound of reform. The sound of creation; he was making himself anew. He felt as though his tissues, once enfeebled by the crippling comfort of tranquility, were hardening into new ones, colder and stiffer than ever before.

“Swinging a blade to my heart’s content...”

Unwittingly, the corners of his lips curled upwards. Color disappeared from his world. With visual clutter removed, his eyes saw even more clearly. There were still plenty of foes. Plenty of prey. Every stroke of his katana brought with it a rush.

“...is just... too much fun!”

An ecstatic surge of adrenaline threatened to consume him, but he snapped out of it just before it took hold. There were two reasons for this. The first was that Shion, who still resided in his left arm, uttered a soft moan of agony. Apparently, he had been holding her too tightly; his arm pressed against her so forcefully that she was struggling to breathe. The second was that he heard a faint scream from inside the house. As far as he knew, he and Shion were the

only ones within the premises who even had voices with which to scream. Though the wavering ghost-like forms in front of him could technically produce wails of their own, they were not the source; the scream he heard was definitely that of a young girl.

"Renya..." moaned Shion from within the cradle of his arm. Her breaths were coming in gasps.

He felt a pang of anxiety. Had he gone too far? Was he choking her? Her next words, however, brought his thoughts to a screeching halt.

"More..."

His arm went slack on reflex. Feeling like that wasn't enough, he added a push to the motion, ensuring that the body hit the ground with an audible thump. As if on cue, the pale white figures that surrounded them gave one vigorous shake before vanishing like candle flames in a gust of wind. Silence returned to the garden. As he slowly turned in a circle and checked around him to make sure nothing else posed a threat, a voice came from below him. Shion, who he had just tossed onto the ground, was protesting her treatment.

"You know, that was definitely where you were supposed to look at my teary eyes, Renya, and feel your heart skip a beat."

"Ah. Well, sorry my heart didn't skip a beat, but those masochistic vibes of yours sure sent a chill down my spine."

"Masochistic girls are adorable, aren't they?!" she exclaimed as she latched onto him again.

"Okay, you need to shut up for a bit," he complained, "and also fix that demented personality of yours."

Renya effortlessly brushed aside her attack, sending her flopping onto the ground again.

"Hnngh... Well, anyway, moving on." She slowly got up, dusted herself off, and looked at the house. "Someone's in there, huh?"

"You heard it?"

He spoke with genuine surprise, which caused her to turn toward him with her hands at her hips. Her attitude suggested that she was upset to discover he held her in rather low regard.

"I sure did. It was a scream. Sounded like it was from a little girl... probably because you spooked her."

"Hm. I can't deny that the sight of me going crazy with a katana might be too stimulating for young children... but we didn't see anyone else in that building, right?"

"You think a kid just wandered in?"

"Maybe, but we'll be here all day if we start listing all the possibilities. We should probably just take another look inside..."

Renya sheathed his katana and was about to walk back to the building's entrance when Shion called out to him from behind. When he turned around, he found her with her hands outstretched, desperately trying to reach out to him. She seemed distressed.

"What's the matter?"

"After being thrown around so much, my head is spinning..."

He looked her over and discovered that her knees were indeed shaking. While she was putting on a calm front, she seemed to be having trouble keeping her eyes focused in one direction. He conceded that he might have gone a little too far this time. When he first heard that she couldn't walk, he had considered just ditching her there. However, he decided that he'd feel guilty if he left her stranded and unable to move in a ghost-infested garden all by herself, especially when he was the cause of her disability.

"All right, fine. I'll drag you in. Happy?"

Shion tripped where she stood.

Out of all the methods to transport a lady, she probably wasn't expecting that one. With an effort of will, she laboriously stood back up on her trembling legs and pointed a finger at him.

"I demand to be carried like a princess!"

"I'll see you when you can walk again, then."

"Sorry, forget I said that! Don't go! Don't ditch me! Please don't leave me here by myself! But can't you carry me on your back? Or at least at your side like before? Please!" she cried, the look in her eyes a mute appeal of the claim that all girls dream of the princess carry.

He shrugged, then turned around and lowered himself before her.

"Here you go. Piggyback, then."

"Oh, um, thanks..."

She meekly wrapped her arms around his neck and rested her body against his. With a grunt, he picked her up on his back and made his way to the house.

"Do you know where the voice came from?" he asked.

"Probably from the workshop. The window facing the garden there was open."

He raised an eyebrow. To notice such a detail while being twirled through the air was no small feat. He re-adjusted his respect for her, figuring that even if she noticed by pure coincidence, it wouldn't hurt to dial it back up a notch. Otherwise, he'd have to break the knob to turn it any lower.

They entered the workshop through the front hall. It remained brightly lit by his orbs. As he lowered Shion from his back and rested her against the wall, he noticed there was someone lying face down on the ground.

"The heck is this?"

It was a young girl with flaxen hair trimmed to shoulder-length. She wore a bicolored apron-like dress of white and black. To put it simply, there was a girl in a maid costume on the floor. What surprised him, however, was how short the girl was; she probably wasn't more than a meter tall. He immediately dismissed the possibility that she might have wandered in here by accident. A normal girl might have done that, but this was no normal girl. He couldn't even call her a child; while her stature was small enough, her arms

and legs were much too thin while her head and the rest of her body were about as big as an adult woman's. It was a peculiar sight; it looked as though a grown woman in a maid costume had been shrunk by a size or two. Her ears, long and thin and pointy-ended, were also decidedly unhuman. The word "elf" flashed in his mind. If this was what elves looked like in this world, though, then they must live in a place that would look like a kingdom of miniatures to him.





“Hey, Shion, are elves supposed to be midgets?”

“You don’t know what elves look like? They’re about the same size as us, except with super flat chests.”

To make sure, he flipped the girl over and — for the purposes of investigation — groped around her body. She did not wake up, though she might have stirred slightly. While the mounds of her chest were modest, they were undoubtedly present. He certainly didn’t think they deserved the adverb “super.”

“Hm, not exactly flat.”

“I’m pretty sure ‘elf’ was the wrong direction to take in the first place... In fact, I think that might be a Silkie.”

**☐Notification: Help Activated — Silkies are considered a type of fairy, or sometimes a type of ghost, that are bonded to homes. Though their appearance may vary, they often take on the shape of beautiful young girls and aid in house chores. Should they become displeased with the residents, they may employ illusory or telekinetic magecraft to drive the residents out of the home. Caution is advised. They have a strong tendency to preserve the state of the house to the best of their ability.☐**

“Huh. You know about them? I’m impressed,” he said as he skimmed the help message.

“I remember hearing about them from the books people read to me when I was little,” she answered without a blush. “They’re fairies who are good at housework, and if they like you, they’ll help you protect your home. If they don’t like you, they’ll throw things around, break things, and generally just be a huge pain for you.”

“Fairies, you say? And not ghosts?”

“Duh. You can’t touch ghosts, right?”

Fair point. He had just flipped the girl over, after all. Flipping requires touching. In other words, touchable meant fairies and not touchable meant ghosts. It was a method of categorization that left him scratching his head a little, but

he supposed he'd have to accept it. Maybe that was simply how they classified things here.

"Why would a fairy be passed out in a place like this, then?"

"I didn't even know fairies could pass out... but there's nothing weird about it being here, right? This is a home, after all."

To Renya, it seemed rather meaningless to be a beautiful young girl with a knack for house chores when she had to spend all her time in an abandoned house. Now was not the time to ponder such things, though. First, he needed to ask the fairy some questions. To do that — assuming they could even communicate in the first place — he had to wake her up. He put a hand on her delicate body and, as though he were handling a fragile glass sculpture, gave it the gentlest of shakes. His nervous mannerism drew a giggle from Shion, who was observing him from her position against the wall.

"..."

He tried a few more times. The girl's eyelids twitched, and a small gap slowly appeared between them. He caught a glimpse of two jade orbs, crystal-pure. They peered back at him through the narrow opening. Then, she suddenly burst into a fit of panicked motion. Her eyes sprung open, and her upper body sprung up. Presumably, she would have also sprung away, but her legs seemed to have failed her, which left her dragging herself across the floor with her arms in a desperate attempt to distance herself from Renya.

It was an extremely uncomfortable sight that made him feel like he was partaking in something very wrong. So, he sat down on the floor cross-legged, undid his sword belt, and threw it to Shion. Once he saw Shion catch it, he turned to the fleeing girl and called out to her.

"Hey, look, I'm not holding anything dangerous anymore. Don't be so scared. I don't mean to harm you."

The girl, perhaps exhausted from all that pulling, stopped crawling away and turned around.

“...Get out of here!” she shouted at him in a harsh tone.  
*Well. It looks like communication won't be a problem.*  
*Good to know.*

“Why do you want us out? If you've got a good reason, then we'll certainly consider leaving.”

“Because this is my home!”

“Shion, let me confirm something. Does stuff like property rights and land ownership apply to fairies?”

“They're *fairies*, Renya. Of course not.”

“No! This is my home! I was born here so it's mine!”

“Okay, okay, take it easy. We're not here to figure out whose home it is, much less hand you an eviction notice. In fact, I have no idea what's going on here, so I'd really appreciate it if you could do some explaining for me, uh... You know, it'd also help if I knew your name,” said Renya, figuring that the modest approach of asking for an explanation and her name would do him well.

“Before you ask someone their name...”

“Oh, yeah, I should start by introducing myself, right? I'm Renya Kunugi. That's Shion. We're both adventurers. It's a pleasure.”

The girl looked down, then in the softest of whispers, said,  
“I don't... have a name...”

With her eyes downcast, the girl began to tell her story. She explained that she had first become conscious in this house about three years ago.

“I was in the basement.”

“There's a basement? In this house?”

“The workshop has a trapdoor.”

She had been born into darkness. The smell of dust and grime permeated the gloom surrounding her. Not a sliver of light could be seen. Being a fairy, however, she did not mind, so she simply walked up the stairs to the ground floor.

“When I got out, I was supposed to say hi to the people living here, but...”

“The place was already deserted, huh? Is it normal for Silkies to be born into empty houses?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know any other Silkies.”

At that point, the house was already in significant disrepair, and weeds were growing rampant throughout the garden. Faced with a house that was falling apart, she had wanted to do her Silkie duty and start fixing it up, but her fairy nature did not allow her to do so.

“Silkies like me are generally fairies who help out the residents. Or we might have to wait until the residents request for us to do something.”

“...And there were no residents in this house to make that request,” Renya supplied.

As a result, she had no choice but to devote herself to her other job as a Silkie: preserving the current state of the house. To that end, she had to try her best to prevent people from entering the premises. The presence of people, after all, represented a change to the house’s “abandoned” state. Normally, she should have been eagerly waiting for new residents to move in so that she can help them and fulfill their requests. However, the house had already been abandoned when she was born. That presented a contradiction. Her head knew it, but her body wouldn’t listen. It was a rare case in which a Silkie’s fairy nature ended up functioning like a curse.

She had to prevent intruders from approaching, but as a Silkie, she was poorly-equipped for combat. Fairies by nature had plenty of mana to work with, but they could only use very basic magecraft. It was likely that she would not last long in a head-on fight against humans. With such concerns in mind, she continued patrolling the house until one day, a real estate agent brought some clients to take a look around the house’s surroundings. As they talked, she overheard the ghost story about the merchant, and decided to make use of it.

Widely known to be tricksters, fairies had a knack for

making people see or hear things, simple manipulation of objects from afar, and turning invisible. By employing these talents, she soon set the stage for rumors to run wild, and a haunted house — every bit as creepy as told in the story — was born. She figured that nobody would want to be near such a creepy house.

“And then a creep like Renya showed up.”

“Right, I’ll be having a word with you later, Shion.”

“A... A creep—”

“Hey! Damn it, fairy,” he complained at the small figure who started to slowly back away from him, “you of all people don’t get to look at me like you just saw a ghost. I mean, I’ll admit that I might have been a little too excited to hear that this place is haunted, but...”

Renya sighed and trailed off, his self-awareness catching up to him. The fairy also decided to sit back down, looking a little embarrassed. Apparently, her blatant revulsion had been reflexive. Now that everyone was being civil again, he took a moment to consider how to lead into his next topic. Then, he spoke.

“Anyway, the point is that I’m thinking of purchasing this property.”

His statement took the fairy by surprise and was met with a blank stare. He studied her for a second, trying to catch a glimpse of something — some flicker of emotion in her eyes, perhaps — that would hint to what she was thinking. Was that rejection he saw? Or approval? He couldn’t tell. Nevertheless, there were things that had to be said, so he continued in a patient, deliberate tone.

“Of course, you can refuse. If you’re adamant about not letting anyone touch this place and keeping it as an abandoned house, then I’ll certainly consider looking into a different property. I have one question though. I don’t know much about Silkies, but how long will you last like this? Can you just keep protecting an empty house?”

The fairy shook her head.

*As I thought.*

Judging from what Shion and the Help Function had said, he suspected that once bonded to a house, this kind of fairy maintained her existence through communication with the residents. The whole “driving residents out when she doesn’t like them” seemed a bit contradictory, but anyhow, he was pretty sure that interaction with people was a necessary element. Supposing he was right, if she were to keep guarding an abandoned house like this, she would grow weaker and weaker. Sooner or later, she would likely perish.

“If that’s the case, then I’d prefer to move in here, even if I had to force the issue...”

If her fairy instincts forced her to prioritize preserving the state of the house and she kept trying to drive them out, he could shoulder his way in and overpower her again like he did this time. Once he settled down here, he’d become a resident whom she could help. That might cause her to come around. This idea, however, was met with a shake of her head.

“You still want us out?”

“No... I tried once, and I lost. And you expressed your intent to live here, so the desire to preserve the house’s current state is gone.”

“So, that means all I have to do now is actually move in?”

“Mm-hm, but...”

She looked at Renya and hesitated. The gesture made him grimace on the inside, wondering what else was a problem.

“Will you...” she said timidly, “really come live here? In a creepy place like this?”

“I sure wouldn’t if it was up to me,” Shion blurted out before a glare from Renya caused her to shrink back. Meanwhile, the tiny victim of Shion’s remark looked to be on the verge of tears.

“Well, we have one more friend,” said Renya, trying to placate the distressed fairy, “and we still have to discuss it

with her. Chances are, though, we'll end up living here."

"Really? I await your arrival, Master!"

The fairy burst into a radiant smile. Shion smirked for some reason. Renya, for his part, wasn't quite sure what to think. With an awkward expression on his face, he patted his new Silkie friend on the head.

Afterwards, neither Renya nor Shion felt like sleeping, so they waited the night out and headed back to the inn at the crack of dawn. They explained the situation to Rona, who told them that as long as the two of them were happy with it, she was fine with whatever. With Rona's disinterested but approving response in hand, they quickly made their way to the real estate office, whereupon they shocked the agent by showing up in perfectly sound condition, albeit wanting to sleep. Choosing to not mention the fairy, they simply announced that they didn't see any ghosts and were going to buy the place. The man immediately glowed with delight, explaining that every client who had shown interest in that property so far had, without exception, ran into ghosts there. As a result, the property had become an unsellable defect. The man let out a sigh of relief and mentioned that Renya's purchase was a weight off his shoulders.

Renya did not let the man's remark go unnoticed. He pounced on the opportunity, reminding the agent that the proverbial lifting of weights should be a mutual endeavor, and began to haggle. Shion looked on with mild awe, wondering how he still had the energy after an all-nighter. An intense period of verbal dueling followed. Eventually, the agent caved and agreed to Renya's proposal: a one-time down payment followed by periodic installments to be paid back whenever he could, whenever he wished — no badgering.

Renya retrieved the money from his inventory, gave it to the agent, signed a contract, and placed the contract in his inventory. Then he took the keys to the house and dashed

back to the inn with a tired Shion behind him. On the way back, her sleepiness got the better of her and he ended up giving her a second piggyback ride. Upon returning to the inn, he stopped only to announce the conclusion of the purchase before departing again for the house, this time with Rona at his side as well. Along the way, Rona questioned his hasty decision-making, to which he answered that there was a reason for his rush to get things done.

He wasn't sure if the same was true of fairies in this world, but the term "fairy" had always evoked a sense of fickleness for him. While the Silkie had been willing to acknowledge him as "Master," he couldn't shake the feeling that if he took too long, she'd decide to start their relationship over from the very beginning. As soon as he arrived at their destination, he introduced the fairy to Rona and officially declared that they were moving in.

"All right. First order of business, get rid of all this old junk and buy new furniture. Are you up for it?"

"Mm-hm! Leave it to me!"

It turned out that his fears were unfounded. The cheery grin on the Silkie's face signaled to him that he could declare this part of his mission complete. He appreciated the feeling of having a load taken off his shoulders. All that remained was the load on his back, which was happily snoozing away...

What came next was a string of events during which Rona and the fairy displayed their competence while Renya and Shion gaped from the sidelines. First, Rona produced a retinue of merchants and workers seemingly out of thin air. They quickly emptied the house of old articles, sold some, scrapped the rest, and took new orders. A storm of activity engulfed Renya. As detailed discussions of the whats and wheres of interior decor took place, he stood in the middle of it all, bewildered and lost. By the time he came to, new furniture was already lining his spacious new quarters, their prices negotiated and payment method finalized. Since he

was strapped for cash, Rona dug into her own savings to foot the bill for the time being.

"I'm moving in as well, after all, and if I'm going to live here, then I'd prefer to live comfortably... while racking up some favors along the way," she said before adding in a whisper, "You owe me one now."

In that instant, Renya felt a chill like nothing before.

The fairy also pulled far more than her fair share of weight in their extensive remodeling project. Originally, Renya had been worried about her being seen by the merchants and workers moving in and out of the house. However, as soon as it had been decided that the three of them were living here, the fairy's appearance changed; she now looked like a normal little girl, ten years old or so, who was dressed in a maid uniform. Apparently, she used to have the stature of humans with the looks to match, but the long years she had spent living in an abandoned house drained her strength and caused her to shrink.

"Doesn't that mean you were in a pretty dangerous spot, then?"

"Mm-hm. But I had yucky food. I ate it and it kept me going."

He raised a curious eyebrow. What *did* fairies eat?

"For the most part, food for us fairies is mana. We bond to homes so we can slurp up the mana that leaks out naturally from the residents."

"...I think I know where this is going, and I'm not thrilled to hear it. What exactly was that yucky food you mentioned?"

"The malicious ghost of the person who was apparently put to death in the garden."

Shion's face turned pale at her words. Rona smiled weakly.

According to the fairy, when she'd first woken up, she discovered the merchant's soul in a corner of the house, halfway through the process of materializing as an evil

spirit. Despite its allegedly awful quality, it was nevertheless a handsome hunk of mana, so she quickly got her hands on it. Thus was the ghostly merchant subject to death by slow and systematic mastication, ultimately perishing a second time.

“I guess you might call that karma?”

“Whatever. I don’t care enough about dead serial killers to pray for their souls,” said an apathetic Rona. “Maybe it should be glad it got eaten. It can’t go to Hell if it no longer exists, after all.” It seemed a questionable statement coming from one of the priesthood, but Renya chose to not pursue the topic further.

The newly-invigorated fairy proceeded to summon a mighty gale that swept through the house and blew all the dust and trash out into the garden. Then, at her command, blades of wind sliced through the rampant weeds and branches outside to trim them down.

As for Shion and Renya, their contributions to the effort consisted of standing, gaping, and marveling at the proficiency of their comrades.

At the end of it all, a small mountain of garbage had accumulated in the yard. Shion walked over and set it aflame. In the meantime, Renya was digging a hole in a corner of the garden. Once the great garbage bonfire sputtered and died, they swept the pile of ash into the hole, covered it with earth, and wrapped up. Total time taken: a mere two days, counting from Renya’s initial decision to make the purchase.

Their job finished, the three adventurers dragged their tired bodies into the living room down and laid down on their new leather sofas. Within seconds, they were fast asleep. Eventually, their miniature maid appeared as well, having diligently prepared tea and dessert for the slumbering residents. She approached Renya.

“Master! Your work isn’t done yet!”

“Wha... What’s not done?” he asked as he was shaken

awaken by the shoulder.

“My name! Give me a name, please! I don’t want to be ‘fairy’ all the time!”

“A name...”

A few names surfaced in his sleep-addled mind. He immediately dismissed them. “Coco” or “Daisy” definitely weren’t going to do; she wasn’t a pet. Through an effort of will, he managed to extract from his sluggish thoughts a certain name. When he posed it to the fairy, she approved it with a gleeful smile.

Thus did Renya gain a house, a workshop, a garden, and the companionship of a home-protecting, chore-doing fairy named Frau Verde.

## **Chapter 2: Azu Returned, or So It Was Told**

“So, you bought a house, huh?” said Azu as he leaned back in the sofa and gazed around the guest room. “You didn’t hold back, did you?”

Now a teacher, he came draped in a black robe of considerably finer quality than the gray one Renya remembered. Silver accessories adorned the robe in a rather mage-like fashion, lending him a very convincing air.

His housewarming gift lay on the table in the form of a fruit basket filled primarily with citrus fruits. Unlike those of Renya’s original world whose peels were unsuited for consumption due to pesticides, these were as organic as they came. He told Frau to keep the fruits in the food storage bin in the kitchen, making a mental note to savor even their peels later.

It was worth noting that food storage bins under the care of a Silkie were a real marvel. Through magecraft, Frau maintained constant control over both the humidity and temperature of the bins. In other words, it was both fridge and freezer, and could even be used to age meat — dry or wet, his choice. When he first learned of this revelation from the fairy, he could barely suppress the urge to shamelessly shower himself with praises. It was a brilliant idea to buy this house, and he sure was glad he did.

“I still owe a ton of money, but oh well. Either way, we would have eventually needed a place to stay.”

“Indeed. You can travel far and wide all you’d like, but it’s important to have a home to come back to. With that said, though...”

Azu shifted his gaze from the sofa across the table where Renya sat, looking past him at the short figure of a maid currently busying herself with the task of preparing tea. With the aid of a stool, she stood just tall enough to reach over the back of the sofa and hand Renya his cup.

"Another one," he said in a voice of mild awe. "And a fairy this time... How much longer until you complete your harem?" Relying perhaps on his magely expertise in such matters, Azu managed to discern Frau's true identity with one look.

Originally, Renya had his reservations about allowing Frau to be seen by others, but upon consulting Rona, he learned that fairies were not as rare as he'd thought. In an ironic discovery, he was also told that in terms of walking freak shows, between a fairy and a Wanderer, the latter would by far draw the bigger crowd. Rona further mentioned that while the presence of a Silkie in a home might have bumped up its price before sale, now that he had officially signed the contract, there was no way for anyone to make the Silkie case anymore.

"Watch the slander, buddy," said Renya, furrowing his brows. "Besides, look at her. It'd be a criminal offence if I tried to get my hands on her, right?"

Azu's reply, however, caused his brows to furrow further.

"You know it's pretty common for nobles to marry once they're past ten, right? Sometimes, they're born engaged. Not to mention there are plenty of thirty-year-old men in the nobility who wed twelve-year-old girls from lower houses to make them thirteen-year-old mothers."

"How do they even get... Honestly, I think I'm a little impressed."

"It's half-compulsory at times. Almost like an obligation. In fact, there's some good money to be made with drugs of that sort."

Azu chuckled, explaining that drugs for enhancing stimulation and improving endurance were very popular.

They enjoyed great demand and fetched a high price on the market.

“Are those legal?”

“Of course? You do realize the guild puts out missions for gathering raw materials, right?”

Faced with Azu’s recommendation to give it a try if he was short on money, Renya remained wordless, silently swearing to never go on such a mission — at least not with Shion and Rona present. Behind them, Frau did not so much as bat an eye at the nature of their conversation. Fairies were not to be taken lightly; they had composure in spades.

“Speaking of money, I assume you’re going to need some more stuff now that you’ve bought a house like this.”

“Yeah. There are the costs of keeping it maintained, and I still have to pay back the loan. I’m going to have a constant need for money.”

“Your contract sounds pretty damn generous, though. To be paid back at your leisure with no pressure from the lender?”

It was, according to Azu, a pointless contract that was practically saying they didn’t care even if he defaulted on the payment. This was not an overstatement; since the lender could not pressure him, as long as he kept claiming he couldn’t pay, he’d never have to. That was, however, not the option he wanted to take. Despite there being no requirement of immediate repayment, he still decided that he’d try to his best to pay it back sooner rather than later. From the perspective of a merchant, the longer it took to collect a payment, the less the profit. He didn’t want to make life hard for merchants.

“On a different note, there’s actually two reasons I came here today. One is of course your housewarming, but I also have a favor to ask you. There’s a job I want you to do for me. You’ll be paid for it.”

“Huh. You’re bringing me work now? I certainly appreciate it, but what kind of work is it?”

There was a vast difference between a request from a stranger and a request from Azu; he felt far safer with the latter. If it earned him good money, then all the better. Even if it wasn't lucrative, so long as it didn't involve anything too crazy, he was willing to do it for a friend.

"I think you're aware that I took up a teaching position in a school that fosters adventurers?"

"Yeah, you told me that before you left last time."

"Right. About that. You see, I was put in charge of a class with a lot of kid nobles and, well... I now have a problem on my hands."

"Problems dealing with nobility, huh..."

Renya grimaced. First of all, the term "nobility" evoked nothing but negative impressions in him. He was well aware that it was a prejudice of his, but he simply couldn't help having the following phrases pop up in his mind: insufferable, looks down on commoners, dirty with money and influence, and a bunch of spineless cowards. Of course, there were probably nobles who weren't described by those terms, but he figured those were outliers.

"So, each class in the school is taught by a different teacher. The problem happened in the class for combat training. The teacher there lost against the students..."

There were two enormous hurdles to finding teachers to teach actual fighting. The first was that very few people were willing to do it. The second was that out of the people who were, few of them were sufficiently competent. Active-duty knights and adventurers could hardly be bothered to consider the poorer-paid position of schoolteacher. For knights, the prospect of nurturing the younger generation was simply unattractive; for adventurers, they'd actually increase their own competition by creating more rivals for their jobs. It was a foolish task that only a fool would undertake, and such fools were in short supply. Naturally then, only certain kinds of people found their way to teaching position. Some were like Azu, whose party had

broken up. Others were knights or adventurers who saw little future for themselves in their respective career paths and decided to quit early — second and third-rates, essentially. Even so, they rarely found themselves bested in skill by mere pupils at a school.

Rarely, but not never.

On rare occasions, young nobles tutored beforehand by parents who serve in the military would enroll in the school having already achieved a certain level of mastery. In addition, they often hailed from lineages that had long-standing military careers or produce many court mages. As a result, there were disproportionately great odds of these fast-tracked students turning out to be prodigies, who display a proficiency of skill unbecoming of their age. Against such students, experience alone was an insufficient advantage, and third-rate adventurers would find themselves suffering humiliating defeats in combat.

“Yeah, I definitely wouldn’t be doing any teaching if that happened to me. I’d be looking for a rock to hide under.”

“I trust you agree that defeating someone in combat does not preclude them from being your teacher? Even a third-rate adventurer should have plenty of wisdom to impart by virtue of his or her experience in adventuring.”

Renya tried to imagine a scenario that would illustrate Azu’s point. He was unsuccessful. His friend’s confident tone, however, convinced him that there must be some truth to those words, so he didn’t dwell on it any further. Perhaps Azu had meant the kind of advice one might find in a bargain bin book: “Five best ways to improve your party dynamics” or “How to find a mission that’s right for you.”

“Instead, a couple of them started refusing to come to class, saying they had nothing to learn from a loser. Quite the headache, really.”

“It’s not like they’re skipping your class, right?”

Azu grimaced a little and scratched his head.

“True, true. It’s not exactly my problem, but...”

A period of silence befell them, during which the mage scratched his head ever more fervently. Clearly, there were things he didn't want to say. Figuring that it'd be rude to pry, Renya decided to change the topic.

"Well, whatever. Moving on. Let's talk details. What will I be doing and under what conditions?"

"Hm? Ah, about that. I want you to take those cocky upstarts and put a dent in their egos. We'll do it in a mock battle as part of combat training."

According to Azu, the school's sparring grounds were covered by a special force field that made it so all injuries would stop just short of becoming fatal. In other words, his job entailed the following: go to the sparring grounds, pick out the young nobles who were misbehaving, and literally beat the spunk out of them. Specifically, he would smash their egos into smithereens and then continue to wipe the floor with their broken bodies until they swore to never mock their teacher again.

"You *are* a teacher, right? Are you sure this request is, like... you know, okay?"

"These are kids who just don't listen. So, we'll hammer it into their bodies. It'll do them good to know where they stand in the food chain. It's a form of teaching, right?"

"Why don't you do it yourself?"

"I could, but I'm weak at close-quarters combat. That's why I had to get people to protect me back when I was doing jobs. If I fought those kids, I'd have to flatten the whole lot of them with one big spell right off the bat. Even then, if any of them managed to survive and get close to me, I'd be done for."

Unlike warrior-types who could more or less fight by simply swinging things really hard, mages were always slower to attack due to their casting time. Furthermore, many spellcasters did not train their physical strength, so even a weaker opponent who specialized in close combat could often gain the upper hand when given a chance to

close the gap.

"To that end, you're the perfect candidate; you've got a mean sword arm, and you also use magecraft. A bunch of school kids won't stand a chance against you, right?"

"Ehh, yeah, probably."

The way Renya saw it, against a couple of punk kids, they could hand him a mop and he still wouldn't break a sweat. Technically, though, he had no business calling them punk kids, considering he currently wasn't much older himself.

"I know you might have your reservations, but I'd really appreciate the help. How about it, Renya?" Azu leaned forward and lowered his head.

It was true that Renya wasn't particularly keen on the idea — it sounded uncomfortably like child abuse. While he couldn't just turn down a friend who lowered his head, he was having trouble convincing himself to do something as pointless as participating in a mock battle he knew he would win.

"There's another perk. Do the job, and you also gain access to the school's facilities."

"Why would I want access to those? I'll probably have nothing to do there..."

"Nothing to do there? Are you mad, man? It's the school for adventurers we're talking about. You know they have a transfer gate there, right?"

"The heck is that supposed to be?"

"What? You don't know what a transfer gate is?" Azu asked in surprise, which reminded Renya that he hadn't told his friend about being a Wanderer.

"Yeah. See, I'm actually what you'd call a Wanderer."

"Oh? I see. That certainly explains why you haven't heard of transfer gates."

This time, Azu didn't seem very surprised, which caught Renya off guard. Seeing a hint of disappointment on Renya's face, the mage explained,

"True, Wanderers are indeed rare, but they're not unheard

of. We've seen enough of them to confirm they exist. They might be otherworldly, but they're still basically human. No reason to make a fuss when they're the same as us, right?"

"That's such a *you* way of looking at it... Anyway, what's the deal with this transfer gate in the school?"

"Transfer gates are mana crafts made in the shape of a gate. They come in pairs, and each gate is connected to the other, allowing you to travel between them regardless of how far they're separated. They're a marvel of a thing, but each gate can only send you to its designated pair, and on top of costing a fortune in manastones for each use, they can only handle transporting one person at a time. As a result, they're not very prevalent. The Adventurers School, though, has set up a network of transfer gates with other schools to facilitate travel between them."

"Hm?"

"Once you gain permission to use them, you can go almost anywhere in the human territories with transfer gates. In fact, there's even a gate that sends you straight through the Miasmal Forest and the demon lands, popping you out on the western side of the continent where the elves live."

"Wow. That's pretty cool."

Despite the one-person limit, the existence of such a transportation network meant he could not only traverse the human territories much more quickly but also jump all the way over to the elven territories. With a ticket to the transfer gate as a reward, what was once an unappealing job now seemed very much worthwhile.

"It'll only take you half the day. Your compensation will consist of the transfer gate's usage permit I just mentioned, as well as one gold that I'll pay you out of pocket. I'll try to ask them to give you a discount on the gate's usage fee, but you'll have to pay that yourself. Sorry."

"You're really trying to sweeten this deal, aren't you?"

The extreme generosity of Azu's offer told Renya two

things. One, Azu really wanted him to say yes. Two, there was no room for failure, and the mage's earlier silence suggested he wanted to avoid explaining why. Of course, that had nothing to do with him; those were Azu's problems.

"What do you think? Will you do it for me?"

"It's not a bad deal, and the work itself sounds like something I can do alone. All right, why not? Sign me up."

Upon hearing his approval, a look of relief washed over Azu's expression.

"You're a lifesaver. This definitely makes my life easier. Give me a few days to work out the timing. Is that okay?"

"Sure. I'll leave my schedule open, so try to let me know early."

Now that Renya had taken this job, he couldn't afford to accept any others. If the scheduling took a long time, he'd be forced to stay jobless for the whole duration. That would be inconvenient.

"I'll head back to the school now and sort it out right away. I'll let you know when things are decided."

Once he gained Renya's consent, Azu said a brief goodbye and made a beeline for the school.

"He was trying to help somebody else when he lowered his head, right? He seems like a very nice person," remarked Frau as she cleaned away the guest's leftover tea. "Mr. Azu must care a lot about the person who's in trouble. That's probably why he was in such a rush to head back."

The fairy's words tipped him off, and Renya nodded in newfound comprehension. That would also explain why Azu minced his words regarding his reasons.

*That damn Azu. Oh well. We'll probably see each other on the day of the job. I'll take my sweet time grilling him for answers then.*

Renya took a sip from his cup. The tea was a tad cold, but the grin spreading across his lips was anything but.

The National Adventurers School in Kukrika was located at

the very edge of the residential district. It was one of the city's largest establishments, laying claim to a massive tract of land second only to the military in the central district. Surrounded for some reason by tall fencing and a deep moat, the front gate represented the only viable method of entry. At first, the exteriors of the school reminded Renya of a prison. When Azu led him inside, though, his opinion changed; now, it felt like he had entered a fortress. Upon divulging his thoughts to Azu, the mage explained that the Adventurers School was built as a military facility that would function as a simple fortress for the city during emergencies.

"Using students as troops? I question the sanity of whoever thought of that," muttered Renya in disgust.

Azu looked at him in shock. He raised an eyebrow, wondering what part of his statement drew so much surprise.

"Well, I just thought that you of all people would have nodded approvingly and said something like, 'Yeah, you have to make use of whatever you can.'"

He had a point.

"Ah, hm. I guess that does apply to me most of the time... I wonder what makes this so different? Maybe it's because even I have the common sense to recognize that students should be focused on learning."

"You? Common sense? Man, what is this? Is the world coming to an end?"

"Okay, for the record, I'm pretty sure *I'm* the one with the most common sense in my party, worldly knowledge notwithstanding."

"I think that says more about your party than you... and none of it's good."

The remark elicited a giggle from the little maid at his side.

Back when he first heard about the job from Azu, he had already discussed the matter with Shion and Rona. Upon hearing that he was going to the Adventurers School,

though, both of them expressed their reluctance to accompany him. Neither of them were willing to explain why and stubbornly repelled his inquiries with a simple “We don’t want to go.” He was left baffled, wondering what the heck the deal was with the school, until Rona later divulged the reason to him in private. According to her, they didn’t want to go to the school because of the large number of young nobles enrolled; some of those students probably knew their true identity. Vague memories came drifting back to him, and he hazily recalled being told long ago that Shion was from some well-off family and Rona was her knight-in-waiting.

“Hey! Keep it in mind, okay? It’s important,” complained Rona, who clearly recognized the “now that you mention it” look on his face.

“It’s not like it matters to me,” he replied flatly. “Nobility or not, you’re my party members and my friends. That’s all I care about.”

Rona’s expression brightened before slowly settling back into a frown.

“I’m glad to hear that... but still, I must insist that you keep it in mind, okay?”

“We’ll see.”

The brain did not have an infinite capacity to store memories. It would, by design, forget old ones to make room for new ones, and that process started with the most trivial memories. Upon stating this to Rona, he was given a wry smile as a response.

With his two friends confirmed to be no-shows, he figured this would end up being a one-man task. Frau, however, had heard their exchange and shocked everyone by proposing that she would go. Being bonded to the home, Renya had thought that the fairy couldn’t go outside, but Frau asserted that she could, so long as she stayed close to her master. He quickly agreed. It would be a good opportunity for him to take Frau out of the old house she looked after for so long

and show her around outside.

He pulled himself out of his thoughts and looked at the young maid standing beside him. Having never taken a step beyond the perimeter of the house ever since being born, Frau seemed elated to be getting her first look at the city. Renya naturally broke into a smile, and a similar curve of his mage friend's lips suggested that he shared in the sentiment.

It was a heartwarming sight, or rather, would have been if not for the fact that from the outside, it looked downright criminal — two grown men pulling around a young 10-year-old girl in a maid uniform. Bystanders distanced themselves, opting to watch with suspicion from afar. In fact, the city guards received no small amount of incident reports. In fact, the only reason they weren't taken to a guard station for questioning was because Rona had the foresight to make the rounds and inform people in advance. It would be much later when Renya and Azu would learn of this fact, after which Renya would indignantly protest the deplorable nature of humans to make assumptions based on appearance and prejudice. What he would omit from his tirade, however, was the admission that, faced with a similar sight, he would have reported them too.

"I could show you around the school, but we're a little pressed for time. How about we head straight to the sparring grounds?"

When they arrived, it was just about time for the class in question to do combat training with Azu. Renya took a look around the sparring grounds. It was a simple dome-shaped structure, housing nothing more than a waiting room, a warehouse, and the grounds themselves. Spanning about 25 meters in diameter, the circular area was surrounded by eight pillars. Tiny words had been carved into each pillar, and the pillars were notably socketed with manastones in a way that allowed for them to be removed and replaced. Those eight pillars maintained the force field over the

sparring grounds that prevented any fatal damage from occurring inside. Should any damage prove fatal, the field would negate just enough to prevent death before ejecting the victim out of the grounds. Seeing that the class had yet to begin, Renya took some time to carefully scrutinize the pillars.

“Man, these sure would be handy in a war. Why not use them there? You could prevent every single casualty,” said Renya, his eyes fixed on the pillar before him.

“You think you can just plop these down anywhere? Do you have any idea how many years it took to make one of these pillars?” Azu replied, pounding the pillar a few times with his fist as he spoke. Then, he exhaled through his nose and put his hands at his hips. “Ten years. That’s how long. It costs ten years and five platinum coins.”

“For a single pillar?”

“Yeah. Don’t forget the force field requires eight of them. In other words, you’re staring at forty platinum coins right now. And that’s only the cost to make it.”

In addition to being expensive to build, the size of the sparring grounds was about as big as the force field could get. It was, therefore, a creation meant solely for training or demonstration and had no value in real combat.

In general, if something sounded too good to be true, it was. Renya slid his hand down the side of a pillar as he let out a silent sigh. Before he could philosophize any further, however, some commotion at the entrance to the grounds signaled the arrival of the students. There were twenty of them, and they all came fully armed.

Well, relatively armed. The edges of their swords had been dulled, and they wore simple armor — probably steel — consisting of chestpieces and armguards.

The kids were followed by a woman who looked to be only a few years older than Renya. She wore the same armor as the students, lined on the inside by hemp clothing. Her brown hair was cut short, and her large auburn eyes carried

just a hint of a reddish hue. Had she been smiling cheerfully, she would have been quite the charming lady. Sadly, she had no such air, and her expression was clouded and downcast.





Renya stood off to the side and observed from a distance to not interfere with the class. The woman raised her voice to speak to the class. As soon as she did, he found out why she seemed troubled.

"Okay, everyone, we're starting class! Please make four rows!"

Her voice was fairly loud, but it elicited no reaction from the students. They idly hung about the field, walking and talking and chatting. Sometimes, they would take a few swings at each other with their weapons, but no one bothered to glance in the woman's direction.

"Everyone! We're in the middle of class right now! Please follow my instructions!" she said in an even louder voice, undeterred by the muted reaction. She seemed determined to create an atmosphere in which some teaching could actually happen.

"Teacher?" scoffed one of the male students. He walked in front of the woman. "Give me a break. Losers who can't even beat their students don't get to be teachers."

Renya looked the male student over. Even in his opinion, the kid was well-built.

"The female teacher there is Lealis. The male student standing in front of her is Orran Schmeisser. He's the eldest son of General Schmeisser of the Triden Army and also one of the students who beat her in battle."

"One of...? You mean there are more?"

"Yeah. Over there..."

Azu pointed to a corner of the sparring grounds where a group of female students were gathered. At the center of them stood a girl who wore her blond hair in ringlets.

"See little miss ringlets there? That's Natalia Fatale, eldest daughter of Marquess Fatale. She and Orran are the two who beat Lealis in battle."

"Hm. By the way, how old are they?"

"They're both fifteen."

"Right when they're all full of themselves, huh."

Being nobles, they were insufferable enough, but these kids were exactly at the age when they feel an incessant urge to oppose adults. Their rebellious nature, combined with the fact that they actually managed to wrestle a win from their teacher, had probably set them on an irreversible course toward delinquency.

While Renya and Azu talked, Lealis was trying to restore some semblance of order to the class, but had her efforts thwarted by Orran and his flunkies who stood in her path. As they pressed closer and closer to her, she grew quieter and quieter, eventually losing her words entirely.

"Hey, about that teacher. Lealis, right? What rank is she at the guild?"

"I believe... she reached D before she became a teacher."

"Cool. Right, then. Time for me to do my job. Frau, you stay here with Azu and wait for me, okay?"

"Mm-hm. But this is as far as Frau can be. Any further is a big no-no, so please be quick, OK?"

Frau had to affix her bond to her master to leave the house, so she couldn't move too far away from Renya. He gave the fairy a nod and smile before turning to the mob of students around Lealis. With his right hand, he drew the practice sword he borrowed from Azu and gave it a good swing.

"Hey, big-and-uglies over there," he called out. His voice wasn't too loud, but Orran and his flunkies seemed to hear him. By the time they looked in his direction, he was already halfway through his throw. With one powerful swing of his arm, he whipped his sword at the group of students.

"Better watch out!"

"Wha—?"

They had enough time to see what he was doing and move out of the way. Most of them did. Unfortunately, one poor fool kept teasing Lealis, unaware of what just happened. The practice sword slammed into the side of his head, and he fell to the ground without so much as a peep.

Everyone stood in silent shock at Renya's sudden entry. Unfazed by their wordless gawking, he casually walked over to Lealis, pointedly ignored the fallen student as he picked up his sword, and said hi to the still-stunned teacher.

"I'm Renya Kunugi. Adventurer. Guild rank F. I heard from Azu that a D-ranked senior of mine was in need of help, so here I am."

"Huh? You heard from Azzy?"

Azzy?

Renya quickly spun around and stared at Azu, who matched his speed with a similar spin to avoid meeting his gaze. Even from where he stood, though, he could tell that Azu's ears had turned red. His lips curled upwards. For some reason, Frau also gave Azu a thumbs up. Both master and fairy grinned gleefully at the mage.

"Um, how do you know Azzy? Are you an acquaintance of his?"

"We worked together before. I was with him when he did the job that ultimately sent him here," he answered without looking away from Azu, who seemed determined to scrutinize a particularly distant corner of the grounds for the rest of the day. After a period of stalemate, he decided to release Azu from the fetters of his gaze, figuring he'd interrogate the mage about it later.

"Hey, you."

With the air of someone who was waiting to hear that, Renya turned toward the speaker and grinned. It was a very different grin than the one he showed Azu. Gone was the wink of friendly teasing, replaced by the leer of a hunter whose trap had been sprung.

"What do you want, Jumbo?"

Still surrounded by his flunkies, Orran glared at Renya. Anger was written plain on the big student's face. Renya rested his practice sword on his shoulder and met Orran's stare head-on. His smile widened. Had Orran's sense of danger been as sensitive as Lealis's, he would have

doubtlessly fled the grounds immediately, because that was exactly what Lealis did; sensing something disquieting about Renya, she saw Azu beckoning her and exited the grounds with him. Then, together with Frau, the three of them quickly evacuated to the audience seats outside the force field. The only people who remained in the sparring grounds were Renya, Orran's group, and the rest of the students who watched from a distance.

"A boorish fellow, aren't you? I see that you haven't the slightest idea how to behave before a noble."

Orran's flunkies laughed along with him in a truly flunky-like manner. Their laughs, however, were soon drowned out by an even louder laugh. The laugher, of course, was Renya.

"A noble? Oh, man, you're too good! Look, buddy, there are nobles, and then there are punk kids who got lucky in a fight and won. And you fall squarely in the second category."

"You..."

Orran's eyes began to gleam dangerously. His flunkies' glares were similarly threatening. Even Natalia and the girls around her, apparently having heard Renya's remark, shot menacing gazes at him.

"What, you got a problem? Prove me wrong then. You kids beat a D-ranked adventurer, right? I'm nothing compared to her."

Somewhere in the distance, Renya thought he heard the sound of a sudden and unexpected ejection of liquid from Azu's mouth. Still shouldering his sword, he didn't let it bother him as he raised his left hand and gave the students a provocative curl of the fingers. He was telling the truth, after all.

Rank-wise, anyway.

The body of the student who took a flying sword to the head and fell unconscious was gone. The protective function of the force field had apparently ejected him outside. The implication was clear: with a single hit, Renya had done fatal

damage to the student. In a way, this was not particularly surprising. Even though he had thrown a blunted sword, it was still a sword; a speeding hunk of metal making contact with an unguarded head led to fairly predictable results.

In this case, the person who did the throwing — Renya — was not particularly bothered. His reaction was more or less, “Huh, I guess I just insta-killed that dude.”

The students, however, were *very* bothered. In effect, some guy had just shown up and murdered one of their classmates — in a most casual manner, to boot.

“‘Prove me wrong,’ huh. Big words coming from a lowly adventurer, and a third-rate at that. Those words are going to get you in trouble, adventurer scum.” Orran drew his sword. For fifteen years of age, he was fairly tall, and his solid build left no doubts as to how he divided his time between mind and muscle. Standing face to face, he seemed every bit Renya’s equal, despite the fact that Renya was supposed to have been set to eighteen years old. “If you take back what you said and apologize, adventurer, I might consider letting you off the hook.”

Renya kept observing the young noble, paying absolutely no attention to what he was saying; he doubted there was anything worth hearing anyway. Noticing that Orran’s arms were quite thick, he snuck a glance at his own. He smiled bitterly; good thing this wasn’t a bodybuilding contest.

He also took a peek at Lealis. While she wasn’t exactly a delicate flower, her build was slender and lithe. As a fighter, she likely emphasized speed over power. That one observation was all Renya needed to figure out why she lost to Orran.

“What’s the point in beating someone if she had to match your fighting style the whole time?”

“What did you say?”

“Oh, nothing. Don’t mind me. Just rambling on my own here,” said Renya with a dismissive wave of his hand. He shifted his attention to delinquent number two, who had

brought her flunkies over as well and was standing beside Orran with her hands at her hips. Apparently, she had heard Renya too.

"Did I just hear you imply that we won by luck? How terribly offensive. Fortunately for you, I'm a generous person. Prostrate yourself and beg for pardon, and I might forgive you. Go on, now. I'm waiting," said Natalia in an overtly condescending tone.

He looked the ringleted blonde over. Her expression was filled with lofty disdain, but for all her swagger, a growling housecat would have proved more intimidating. She was also puffing out her chest. The effort was futile, though; one could not accentuate that which wasn't there in the first place. Even Lealis, slender as she was, had enough volume to at least prove they're there.

*Well, won the battle and lost the war, eh?*

Renya chuckled. It drew a bewildered look from Natalia, who had not the slightest idea why he was laughing.

One question, however, lingered in his mind. Unlike Orran, who probably approached problems with the "just hit it harder" philosophy, Natalia seemed like she employed the same speed-oriented style as Lealis. Her victory, then, seemed to imply that she was at least on par with her teacher in skill. But was she? His answer was answered by Frau, who was sitting rather far away.

*"Master, can you hear this?"*

"What?" blurted out Renya. In doing so, he quickly realized Frau's voice was different; it seemed to be coming not through his ears but straight into his head.

*"You don't have to talk out loud. This is telepathy. Frau is bonded to Master right now, so we can think to each other."*

*"Damn. You fairies are like the gift that just keeps giving, aren't you?"*

*"Frau likes what she hears and won't mind hearing more. Also, Mr. Azu said that Ms. Lealis fought the blonde with the ringlets right after fighting Mr. Macho. He wanted to tell*

*Master because that would probably answer the question Master had."*

*"Huh. Fair enough. Thanks."*

*"Master is very welcome."*

In Renya's opinion, there was a downside to the protective effect of the force field, and it lay in its mechanism of action. When lethal damage was taken, the field worked by reducing the damage just enough so that it was no longer lethal. Conversely, this also meant that all non-fatal damage would remain unaffected. Normally, some sort of restorative gracecraft would be used after combat training, but Lealis had fought Orran and Natalia back to back. In other words, any injuries she sustained during the fight with Orran were carried over to the fight with Natalia. It took little effort to imagine what had transpired: macho boy there went into braindead bruiser mode and smashed his way through the fight, leaving Lealis to take on her next opponent hurt and considerably less agile.

"Geez, she went easy on one of them and fought the other with a handicap. And now dumb and dumber have got it in their heads that they're hot stuff."

He pressed his palm into his forehead and shook his head, feeling rather stupid for thinking these arrogant kids might have deserved a little credit. The gesture probably seemed patronizing to Natalia, because she drew her sword as well.

"Scoundrel! If you have no intention of fixing that wretched attitude of yours, then I, Natalia Fatale, shall put you in your place!" she announced, glaring at him.

"Great. I can't wait to find out where my place is," he answered in an even tone with his sword still sitting on his shoulder. "Come on, then. Enough talk about how high and mighty you are. After all, by your logic, whoever wins is the highest and the mightiest, right? So, bring it on already." With a look of boredom, he beckoned them with another wave of his hand. He could almost hear the grinding of their teeth. "Oh, and forget your silly little rules about single

combat. Bring all your flunkies too. I'll take every single one of you on, all at the same time."

"You'll regret that big mouth of yours."

"They'll have to carry you to the healing hall once I'm through with you!"

Once again, Renya found himself reminded of the peculiarities of this alternate world. Since they treated people with gracecraft, they didn't send them to hospitals, but rather healing halls. It was another example of how he found the strangest quirks to appreciate sometimes.

Meanwhile, Orran, Natalia, and their flunkies were rushing at Renya with their swords brandished. Seeing that over half the class was setting upon Renya all at once, Lealis was about to shout at the students to stop, but she was held back by Azu and Frau, who motioned to her to calm down and watch.

Renya stood his ground, not moving an inch. The first to strike at him was, as expected, the speed-oriented Natalia. She aimed a dashing thrust at his chest, which he dodged by simply pivoting his body to the right. As she passed him by, he pushed on her shoulder with his left hand and sent her stumbling past him. Next came Orran, who raised his sword high up in the air before slashing downwards. This time, Renya dodged by twisting to the left. In the process, he pulled his own sword off his shoulder and used it to strike a light blow at Orran's waist before hurling the burly student behind him as well. Then, he took his first step forward.

A flurry of attacks from the rest of the flunkies rained down on him. He continued to press forward, evading every single strike without even using his sword. In the blink of an eye, he slipped past dozens of limbs and blades to appear in front of the spellcasters in mid-chant. They stared at him with eyes wide and mouths agape, the rest of their incantations lost to surprise.

"Tactics 101. Kill the mages first."

Renya swept his sword in a horizontal arc. It caught a girl

in the waist. She vanished from view. His sword snapped back and lodged itself in the shoulder of a boy, smacking him down onto the ground.

*Thud.*

The sound of a body impacting hard earth signaled the reappearance of the girl as she rolled wildly along the ground. When she came to a stop, she vanished again, this time for good. The boy, one hand clutching his shoulder, tried to stand back up. He looked up. His face twisted in shock at the sight of an incoming boot.

*"Ah... Sto—"*

The boy's plea went unheard. Renya stamped his foot. A gratifying sensation came from the bottom of his boot. An arm moved to shield its body. He stomped on it. A body crawled away to escape. He stomped on it. The back of a head was exposed. He kicked it. Then, he stomped on it, too.

It writhed. He stomped. It writhed again. He stomped again.

He stomped and stomped until it ceased to move. He looked down. It was gone. Slowly, he turned around.

His gaze lingered for a moment on the remainder of the flunkies, petrified by the atrocity they just witnessed. Then, it shifted to Orran and Natalia, who were staring at him blankly in shock.

*"Frau, let Azu deal with our good teacher Lealis for now. Could you go block off the exit of the sparring grounds for me?"*

*"Okie dokie~"*

For some reason, Renya could feel a chirpy enthusiasm in her thought-words. He momentarily considered if he was maybe rubbing off a little too quickly on her as a couple of girls slashed at him with swords, their cries sounding more like screams of fear than roars of battle. He effortlessly swiped their blades away. One girl stumbled past him, off-balance. He drove a knee into the pit of her stomach. Gut juices spilled out of her mouth. She curled in agony,

exposing the back of her head. He slammed his elbow down on it and stomped on the fallen body. Then, he drove his foot into her side. She retched again, throwing up fluids both yellow and red, but did not disappear. Apparently, it wasn't enough to be lethal. He shrugged and smiled before he dropped his heel firmly onto her head once more. This time, her body faded.

"Azzy?! What is going on?! That person clearly came here to kill people!"

"It's okay, Ms. Lealis. He knows they won't die."

Somewhere in the distance, Renya heard one voice cry out in distress and another trying to placate it. He ignored them and looked around at the students. Seeing three of their classmates wiped out in an instant seemed to have given all of them cold feet. He grunted. That was no fun. At this rate, the goblins at the settlers' village would have put up more of a fight.

He grabbed one of the male students by the collar, pulled him close, and looked into a pair of fear-filled eyes. Before the boy could utter a word, Renya drove his forehead into the bridge of the student's nose. He repeated this a few more times before letting go. The boy crumpled from the knees and fell to the ground, but not before he sent a kick into his victim's groin, leaving the boy frothing at the mouth as he squirmed and twisted in pain. It occurred to Renya that having this kid vanish would be less interesting, so he left him on the ground. Then, he turned back to Orran and Natalia, who still stood unmoving, and smiled.

"Hey, the two boss apes standing there. You'd better do something before all your monkey mates are gone," he said tauntingly at the motionless pair.

Natalia continued to stare at him with a blanched face. Her sword shook along with her trembling hands. She was in no state to fight. Orran, meanwhile, tsked as he gripped his sword with both hands. With a roar, he charged at Renya. Like a true one-trick pony, he swung his longsword down in

the exact same way as before. In response, Renya lifted the sword in his right hand to meet it. The downward swing of two hands clashed with the upward swing of only one. The outcome should have been obvious.

Renya finished his swing. The impact of the clash sent his opponent's sword flying into the air. He glared at the weaponless Orran menacingly before bringing his hilt down on the burly student's forehead.

"Gwah!"

Holding his forehead, Orran contorted backward in pain, only to have Renya forcefully reverse his curvature with a straight kick to the stomach. A rough landing on his rear was followed by a furious assault of words.

"You messing me with, kid?! What kind of swordsman lets go of his sword in battle, huh? Make like a dog and go fetch your damn sword!" he yelled angrily.

Orran had barely managed to get his legs under him before Renya mercilessly sent him flying with another kick.

"I said make like a dog! Do dogs walk on two legs, huh?! Crawl on all fours, you mutt!"

Seeing that Orran was still trying to stand up, he kicked him again. Then, he pressed his foot on Orran's body and ruthlessly stomped until his victim gaspingly slithered away on all fours to retrieve his sword. Finally, he glanced over his shoulder at a boy who was creeping up behind him. That one look caused the student to freeze. It irked him all the more.

"Don't stop," he roared as he threw all his irritation into a full-body swing, "just because somebody looked at you!"

His sword smashed through arm and body alike. The boy fell to the ground before he could utter even a cry. A second later, the boy grabbed one arm with the other, screaming as he squirmed. Had Renya scored a direct hit on the body, it would surely have been lethal. Fortunately for the boy, his arm got in the way, allowing him to get away with nothing more than a complete shattering of the bones in his cushioning limb.

Renya slowly lowered his sword and looked around. The students all cast their eyes downward. None ventured to meet his gaze.

“Th-This isn’t over!”

It was Natalia who spoke. Her hands remained trembling, but she glared at Renya from within her circle of flunkies and yelled her encouragement at her classmates.

“The opponent is only one person! We can do this! Victory is still within our grasp!”

The fact that Natalia had not lost her will to fight combined with their advantage in numbers was enough to hold together the students’ crumbling morale. In addition, though the process of retrieving his weapon was unseemly, Orran was still conscious as well.

“You want to keep going? Hm... I see.” Renya watched as the students brandished their weapons. This time, they moved to surround him. He smiled with glee. “Well, sure. You can’t die here, and there’s no harm in gaining some more battlefield experience... After all, it’s not every day you get to experience the thrill of a massacre from the victims’ side.”

The grounds protected their bodies, but nothing guarded their minds. He took a step forward and scanned the students for his next victim, hoping he wouldn’t have to deal with any mental casualties at the end of it all.

Step after deliberate step, Renya approached the students. Hidden behind his confident gait, however, was a shadow of doubt. He had not expected them to put up so much resistance. Originally, he had hoped the students would cave after seeing two or three of their classmates cut down in an instant. Instead, though his gruesome pummeling had left them shaken to the core, they were still managing to keep themselves together.

He didn’t want anyone to end up dead, so he had been holding back to some degree. Unfortunately, leaving Orran and Natalia mostly healthy proved to be a mistake; the

presence of their leaders was doubtlessly a major factor in maintaining the students' morale. With a tinge of regret, he realized that he should have taken one of them out in the beginning.

Currently, a total of eight students remained: three boys and five girls. Out of those eight, three of the boys and one of the girls had moved in to surround him. Each of the remaining four girls were preparing to use magecraft.

"Hit him from all sides! You don't need to knock him out for good! Slowing him down is enough!"

The front line would buy time while the back line prepared their spells. By employing hard-to-dodge spells to chip away at their target's stamina, they would eventually slow him down enough for the front line to go in for the kill. It was a tried-and-true method of fighting group battles. Even if their opponent proved to be far superior in skill, it would take a good deal of time to defeat swordsmen who were focused entirely on defending. All the while, support fire would be raining down from all sides, making it even harder for the target to break through their formation.

"Don't blame us. You're the one who wanted to fight a group battle." Taking Renya's inaction for hesitation, Orran grinned as he spoke.

In actuality, Renya's thoughts were elsewhere. If he wanted to, he could have smacked down Orran and silenced the girls behind him. However, faced with a mighty foe, the students had made a sincere attempt to come up with a plan of attack. Crude as it might be, it seemed a tad too heartless to simply walk all over their efforts. Were this a true battle, he certainly wouldn't have entertained such thoughts. In battles, when given the chance to crush the opponent, it was common sense to take it. In this case, though, Renya found that he had lost interest in the whole affair. Sure, they beat their teacher and their egos were too bloated for their own good, but they were just a bunch of kids with far more bark than bite. Had they been trained soldiers, he would not

have hesitated, but they were students. And some truly sub-par ones at that. Faced with nothing more than a gang of spunky kids, he couldn't muster the resolve to crush them in cold blood.

"Front line, down! Mages, fire!"

Natalia's orders rang out in the sparring grounds. The defenders at the front retreated, clearing the way for the simultaneous shooting of three firebolts. Those would cause some good damage if they hit, so Renya stepped forward and cut one down with his sword. Unlike when he did so with his own katana, the impact of blade with flame produced yet more flame that blanketed his view. The drastically different result took him by surprise, slowing him by a beat. He barely avoided a direct hit by the next firebolt, but it grazed his left shoulder, leaving a light burn. The sting of pain slowed him yet again, allowing Orran to rush up to him. With the momentum of his charge, Orran made a powerful swing at Renya's left side.

In the heat of the moment, Renya managed to flip his sword from his right hand to his left, reversing the grip in the process. He pressed the flat of the blade against his side, blocking the incoming sword. The impact of Orran's swing, however, shot straight through the blades and into his body, causing him to grimace. Normally, he would have leapt in the direction of the strike to soften the blow, but he instead did the opposite, opting to press forward and push back Orran's sword. In analyzing the situation, he decided that he needed to force the issue or risk being whittled down by a flurry of attacks. This decision of his produced an unexpected result.

"Mage, hit him with a second wave of spells! Don't worry about Orran! Just fire!"

"What? You!"

With Orran so close to Renya, aiming for one of them with spells would risk hitting the other. Renya was counting on that to cause some hesitation in their ranks, but Natalia —

the damn girl was more ruthless than he thought — gave the order to just blow them all to smithereens. He had to give her credit; her decision wasn't wrong. Even if they had to shoot through Orran, hitting Renya would weaken him even further. With three people still standing in their front line and their back line unscathed, they would be far closer to victory. All of this, of course, was based on the assumption that the people involved — both those to shoot and be shot — immediately obeyed her command.

The four in the front all spun around to stare at Natalia as a realization dawned upon them. If Orran was first, any one of them could be next; none of them were safe from sacrifice. The three in the back hesitated. Perhaps it was due to the very act of attacking a friend, or perhaps it was the fact that they risked harming General Schmeisser's son and heir. Either way, they delayed firing off their spells. Next, Natalia was shocked to realize that she had become the focus her classmates' scornful gazes. The final realization came to Renya, who discovered that everyone's attention had shifted away from him.

Renya let out a soft sigh. Looking away from an opponent in battle was to risk certain death, but there was little to gain from lecturing the students right now. Instead, he placed his right hand on Orran's body and pushed. The burly student lost his balance and fell away. The remaining boys had just begun to look back toward Renya when he dashed up to one of them, grabbed the boy's belt with his right hand, and lifted. Employing the technique of hammer throwing, he spun in circles, making about two full rotations. Then, with plenty of centrifugal force built up, he let the boy fly, sending him shooting into the line of girls in the back.

The boy screamed. The girls screamed louder.

The three remaining front liners proceeded to repeat their prior mistake and shift their attention to the new source of commotion. Renya shook his head, finding the effect almost comical. He couldn't tell if these kids even understood what

it meant to be in battle. If they had been listening in class, this would certainly be the teacher's fault for doing a terrible job of teaching. Considering their haughty attitude toward Lealis, though, they probably weren't the most attentive bunch. He couldn't blame Lealis if she never had a chance to teach. As he picked up another victim and hurled the boy-hammer at the girls, a corner of his lip twisted upward.

*Heh. Dodged a bullet this time, didn't you?*

"A-Azzy?! Is it just me or did a terrible chill just run down my spine?!"

"Relax, Ms. Lealis. I'm sure it's just you."

The conversation that drifted into Renya's ears made him grin even more. It seemed that out of all the things these kids stood to learn from their teacher, the first thing should have been her sense of danger.

Only one girl and Orran remained in their front line. The girls in their back line were buried under the bodies of the two boys who flew into them. They were in the process of crawling out, but none of them were in any condition to lend support fire.

"I'm starting to get bored, my dear boys and girls! Aren't you supposed to be nobles? And you can't even beat an F-rank adventurer? After all that big talk, too. Man, in a way, I'm almost impressed."

"Scum... You think you'll get away with this?"

"Ah, of course. Step two of 'How to be a stuck-up brat.' Threaten people with your social standing. Honestly, this is starting to get stupid."

"Y-You damned—"

"Look, buddy. I'm rank F and you can't even beat me. You realize Ms. Lealis is rank D, right? What makes you think you can make fun of her? Do you even know why I'm F and she's D? You clearly have no idea, and yet you still have the nerve to get all cocky about beating her once? What a bunch of clowns you are."

"Shut that dirty mouth of yours!" Orran roared in rage

and swung his sword at Renya. It was a predictable strike. Disappointingly predictable.

A strike from Orran, augmented by his natural gift of size and power, should have been fairly risky to block. If one was skilled enough to not block but evade, however, the big student's blade posed little more threat than those of a windmill. Having lost even the patience to wait for the heavy strike to fall, Renya dove forward and whacked Orran's wrist with his sword. The pain caused Orran to drop his sword again. Renya couldn't be bothered to warn him again, so he snapped his foot up into Orran's groin, who bent forwards with a moan. He looked down. Then, with a hint of theatrics, he slowly raised his sword high above the crumpled student's head.

"W-Wait... Stop! Don't!"

"Are you going to beg for your life? Too bad, because I'm not listening."

Renya's arm came down hard, driving his weapon straight into Orran's shoulder. Orran fell to his knees from the blow, clutching at his injury. However, Renya did not stop there. He slammed his sword down once more. Then, he did it again. And again. Faster and faster. Harder and harder. He rained blow after blow down onto the kneeling Orran. So long as the force field deemed the attacks unlethal, it would not eject the victim outside. Also, so long as hard metal met bare skin, even a dull blade could draw blood. There was no trickery, no technique behind his strikes. There was only the raw ferocity of brute force. He raised his arm, then he brought it down. With each cycle, he tore more flesh, splashing thick globs of gruesome red onto his sword, his arm, and all over himself. Stained with blood, he laughed, high-pitched and maniacal. But he did not stop.

The scene defied description. The onlooking students blanched. No one moved. For a few breathless moments, there was nothing but the sickening noise of cold iron hitting bone and flesh. Eventually, the noises faded. Orran's body

soon followed suit.

One girl remained in their front line. Renya turned his body toward her, allowing his sword to dangle loosely from his hand. A river of red flowed down the length of the blade. Then, slowly, he turned his bloodstained face toward her as well. She barely caught a glimpse of his eyes before her legs failed her and she plopped down on the ground.

"H-Help... Please..."

Her sword dropped onto the ground beside her. She held her hands together in front of her chest and made a desperate plea. Renya said nothing. He took a step toward her. Then, another.

"Please... I'm sorry... I'll do anything... Please don't..."

Renya did not answer. He stopped in front of the girl. Slowly, the same way as before, he raised his sword high above her head.

"Please... No... Not like that... Not like that, please."

The crimson guillotine paused in mid-air. Its holder looked down at the girl. In a cold, flat voice, he said,

"Die."

"Noooooooooooo—"

The blade came down swiftly, cutting short the girl's scream. It flashed before her eyes before hitting the floor with a shrill clang. The cowering girl, eyes wide with disbelief, glanced down. A length of cold metal gleamed in the ground. She glanced back up at Renya. Her eyes rolled back in her head and she fell onto her back. A faint stain began to spread between her limp legs. Renya looked away.

Turning around, he found that the girls of the back line had finally managed to crawl out from under the boys.

"Four more, huh. You're next, girls. How shall I make you scream?"

"N-No..."

Without so much as a glance at Renya, Natalia and the three girls spun around and ran toward the exit of the grounds. Their reasoning, presumably, was that Renya only

did this because he knew they couldn't die within the force field. Once they were outside, they would be safe. Of course, the door of the exit did not open. Unbeknownst to them, Frau had spent this whole time setting up a massive barricade outside to keep the door closed.

"Open up! Open this door! Let us out!"

"Please no! Please, don't let him do that to me!"

"Ms. Lealis! Help! Please!"

Slowly, Renya walked toward them. He made a point of dragging the tip of his sword along the ground. The frightening sway to his steps along with the grating metallic noise struck even more terror into the students' hearts. They banged on the door ever more hysterically.

"What's the matter, girls? What're you so scared of?"

There was a chilling glee to Renya's voice. "Don't worry. You can't be killed in the force field. You can hurt. You can scream. You can be in so much pain you'd rather die..." He grinned and held out his sword, making sure they could all see its cold luster before he raised it high above their heads. "But you won't, so it'll all be fine, right?"





"Stop!" Lealis's voice rang out from the audience seats.  
"Enough. That's... enough. Please, no more..."

"You're not the one who hired me, so..." Renya looked at Azu, who was standing beside Lealis. "Well?"

"You've done enough. I think they learned their lesson."

"All right. Well, if the boss says it's fine, then I guess we'll call it a day."

He casually threw his sword on the ground in front of Natalia and the girls. Then, he turned to their deathly pale faces and fixed them with a glare.

"Now, remember this, girls. All of this has been child's play, and if I ever have to do this again, then you'll see why."

The students vigorously nodded their heads up and down, their hands clutching desperately at the door. Renya had just begun to wonder whether he overdid the intimidation a bit when an explosion sent the door, the girls, and a whole lot of something else flying over his head. They all landed with heavy thuds behind him, and he stared astonishedly at the gaping hole in the wall that was once a door. Frau appeared in the opening with her hands in the air. She beamed at him.

"Yay! Master did a great job!"

"Frau... was that you just now?"

"Taking down the barricade was too much work, so Frau just blew it all away! Frau doesn't waste time because she's a good girl!"

"Uh, okay then. Sure, I guess?"

He glanced at the pile of door and barricade behind him but could find no trace of Natalia or the girls beneath the rubble. They were inside the force field, so they shouldn't have died, but it did raise the question of which was a worse fate: being flattened by debris or beaten to a pulp by him. The answer, he supposed, would now forever elude him.

"All right, Frau, let's go home."

"Yay! Home time! Also, Master needs to change his clothes because he's all yucky."

“Hold on a minute, Renya. What are you going to do about this door you just broke?”

“Just add it to their medical costs. They’re going to demand a fortune anyway, right? I’ll let you handle that.”

“Azzy... we need to talk, okay?”

Azu’s expression stiffened when he felt Lealis pull on his robe. Renya shrugged and left. Whether Azu was about to be thanked or scolded, he did not know, and should not know.

“Good luck, Azu.”

“Make no mistake, Renya... after this, we’re going to have a good talk, too.”

“If I feel like it, sure. Oh, and make sure you pay me, okay? I get upset when I’m not paid. And things get broken when I’m upset.”

“Master, home time! Less talk, more walk!”

Renya and Azu parted ways, each dragged away by their companion. Before the mage even disappeared from view, Renya’s thoughts had already turned to more important matters.

Like, for example, how terribly unpleasant it was going to be to walk home with his clothes thoroughly soaked in blood.

# Interlude: The First One, or So It Was Told

“Damn, girl. You already popped a little one out of there?”

“Out of where?! And no! That’s not my kid!”

A blushing Shion was shouting at the top of her lungs.

Renya glanced at her, wondering what she was getting so worked up about. Granted, the way Frau was half-dangling from his waist did make them look like father and daughter.

The three of them were in Caryl’s store. They had come here at the urging of Shion, who proposed that Renya should learn some more magecraft. Caryl herself sat across the table, leaning back in the same casual manner as last time.

Ever since being told his mana pool was hopelessly small, Renya had been training whenever he could to improve his mana capacity. Recently, he had even started sharing his mana with Frau. As a fairy, Frau’s main source of sustenance was the mana that passively exuded from people. When he had asked her what would happen if he tried actively feeding her mana, she responded with, “Frau is happy to have more for her tummy.” Ever since, he had been letting her have as much as she wanted, figuring it was a better use for his mana than simply burning it off.

Once he incorporated this into his training regimen, however, he discovered that it had an unintended side effect. Normally, mana crafts that used manastones for fuel could not use mana from people in the same way. Frau, being intimately linked to the house and its various fixtures, presented an exception. She could convert the mana provided by Renya into her own, and then use it to power the mana crafts in the house.

In fact, when he had first bought the place, Renya had asked a specialist about it. That is, he brought Azu over to examine the house, and the mage concluded that the house was simply riddled with appliances that used manastones. Examples could be found throughout his home from the kitchen to the toilet, including things like the fireplace, lights, ceiling fans, and water pipes. Presumably, business had been booming for the merchant who owned the place before. Or he had other methods of accruing wealth. Either way, it meant that Renya would be bleeding money if he had to keep everything running.

In came Frau to save the day. Renya could feed his mana to her until he passed out, and he was fine with that. It wasn't like he could use the mana for much else anyway. Strangely, the fairy seemed to have no concept of being full, as she never once refused a supply of mana. No matter how much she ate up, she could always eat more. A curious Rona had once asked Frau about it.

"When mana comes into Frau, it gets squished so she can use it later. Frau thinks it's something like compression."

"There's a limit to how much you can hold, I assume?"

"Of course, but even when Master turns blue from spewing out mana, Frau is only maybe one-fifth full. The house sucks up mana too, so Frau can always put more in her tummy."

The conversation had ended with Rona scampering away with the distinct sensation that the fairy was looking at her with the eyes of a predator who had found its mark.

Later on, Renya gradually began to realize that even if he gave Frau almost all his mana, his Super Regen would quickly heal him back up. As a result, he adjusted the rate of transfer to match the rate of recovery so that he was perpetually feeding her mana. Frau also mentioned that the transfer of mana was more efficient when in close contact, so from then on, she began clinging to Renya whenever she had the chance. On a side note, her preferred position

happened to be riding on his shoulders, which resulted in an influx of reports to the town guards about a strange man who walked around with a tiny maid sitting on his head. That, however, was a story for another time.

“So... is it just me or are there two monsters in my store?”

Paying no attention to the red-faced Shion glaring at her, Caryl looked at Renya and sighed.

“Are you seriously the same person I saw last time? Because you sure don’t look it.”

“I’m... pretty sure I am. What do you mean?” said Renya with a puzzled tilt of his head. The fairy hanging onto his waist tilted her head as well.

First of all, he had no idea who Caryl was referring to as “two monsters.” Considering there were only four people present — him, Frau, Shion, and Caryl — and Shion probably wasn’t it, by the process of elimination, it had to be him and Frau.

“I mean your mana is literally orders of magnitude stronger than when I last saw you. Then there’s also that... fairy, I assume? The little fairy girl that you’ve got wrapped around yourself. It’d be almost comical to compare my mana to hers.”

“Frau’s a fairy so Frau doesn’t mind, but calling Master a monster is a no-no.”

Still clinging to Renya’s waist, Frau grunted disapprovingly at Caryl.

“Okay, okay. My bad,” said Caryl with a resigned smile. “I was just exaggerating a little. I apologize if I caused any offense, so spare me the death glare.”

“I don’t particularly mind, but... hm. I guess I’d also appreciate it if you didn’t call me that,” said Renya. Feeling that the fairy tightened her grip on his clothes, he gave her head a few reassuring pats.

Caryl apologized a few more times as she righted herself in her seat and placed her arms on the table.

"All right. So, what can I do for you today?"

"I think I've got a bit more mana than before, so I figured I'd ask you to teach me some more spells."

"Is this supposed to be some sort of cruel joke? Sorry, but you can put a hundred of me together and we'd still be a drop in the ocean. And that's compared to your little fairy girl there, never mind you."

"So you say. I don't feel anything, though."

The growth of his mana pool did not bring about any obvious changes. He didn't feel any inexplicable surges of strength, and he certainly wasn't walking around with a halo of power glowing behind him. Firebolt and Illuminate were still the only spells he could cast, and the benefits of all the extra mana were limited to the paltry convenience of being able to throw a bunch of them out.

"I managed to get rid of the usage restriction for non-elemental magecraft, but I'd prefer to have some wind spells too. It's my aptitude, after all."

"You make it sound so easy, but just so you know, if everyone started removing their restrictions, people like me might as well close up shop. How did you even do that?"

"Don't ask me. I just did somehow," said Renya as if it were the simplest thing in the world. "I don't know the other incantations, though, so I can't cast anything except Illuminate."

A session of indignant grumbling ensued, during which Caryl rattled off such terms as "freaking Wanderers," "stupidly overpowered," and "makes no damn sense." Finally, the mage pulled two books and a piece of paper out from a shelf.

"Here. Incantations and usage instructions for non-elemental and wind-elemental magecraft. These are trade secrets, by the way. And I'll give you a talisman that removes the restriction for basic wind spells. That'll be ten gold in total."

"That's way more than what I have on me."

"I'll pay then."

Renya didn't have nearly enough cash on hand because he thought he'd be spending maybe about a gold to learn a couple of simple spells. Before he could say anything, Shion dropped a pile of coins on the table.

"Your patronage is appreciated."

"Hey, Shion."

"It's fine. You'll make it back sooner or later. We'll just call it advance payment."

"Well, well, Shion. You sure are putting a lot of faith in the lad," said Caryl with a smirk as she picked up the gold coins on the table. Seeing that her comment caused Shion's cheeks to redden a little, her expression softened and she turned to Renya. "Are you really that great of a catch? Anything in it for me if I got in on the action too?"

"How would I know? Don't ask me," said Renya with a scowl.

Caryl snickered, then took half the coins she just collected and pushed them back across the table.

"I'll invest in you too. Maybe something good'll come out of it."

"Don't blame me if you make nothing back," Renya said sharply, but Caryl's grin remained unfazed. She clearly had a good impression of him.

There were some people, however, whose impression of him was definitely on the bad side, as evidenced by what happened later that evening.

After consuming the dinner he had prepared, the residents of Renya's household were nursing their bloated bellies and enjoying a period of rest and relaxation. Their day-to-day meals were prepared by either Renya or Frau. Rona could cook as well, but she tended to be rather careless with the minutiae of flavoring. As for Shion, what she did could technically be called cooking. Technically. On a good day, one might feel generous enough to refer to it as

such. Renya, however, wanted to eat good food all the time, so he volunteered to be the house cook.

Meanwhile, Frau certainly lived up to her name. Being a house chore fairy, she was predictably — but no less impressively — adept at cooking, cleaning, doing the laundry, and just about every other job around the house. As a result, she and Renya ended up taking turns with the cooking.

The two of them happened to be in the kitchen washing dishes when Frau suddenly looked up at the ceiling and started whispering to herself. Renya glanced at the fairy as he put the clean dishes back to the shelf and, noticing her strange behavior, asked, “Frau? What’s the matter?”

“The house is surrounded,” she answered, the relaxed manner in which she kept washing the utensils at odds with the disconcerting nature of her statement. It was startling enough to cause Renya to freeze briefly. “Lots and lots of people come around here, so it’s easy to miss them. They’re good at not being noticed.”

“Assassins, huh. How many?”

“Fifteen people. Five are women. The poor things. Frau is sad for them.”

Once he had confirmation of their numbers, Renya picked up his katana, which he had leaned against the wall. He was about to leave the kitchen when something occurred to him.

*Did I just hear her say that?*

He stopped and turned around to look at Frau, who had just said something he was very much not used to hearing. Propped up on a stool, the tiny fairy stood just tall enough to reach over the counter. She was still staring at the ceiling as she washed the dishes. He wondered what she saw up there. Eventually, she looked back down at her hands.

“Everyone is holding daggers and wearing lots and lots of black. And they all covered their faces with masks... Probably, they’re people that nobody would be sad to see gone.”

“Uh, okay?”

“Master, put these dishes back please. Frau is going for a little walk.”

“What? Frau!”

“It’s okay. Frau will be right back.”

She hopped off her stool and handed the dishes she’d just washed to Renya. He watched in a daze as she daintily pattered out of the kitchen. A few seconds later, there was the sound of a door closing. Only then did his wits return to him and he rushed after her. His pursuit, however, ended at the door, because no matter how hard he pulled on it, it refused to open. Being the door to the dining room, it didn’t even have a lock, which meant Frau was the only one who could keep it shut. He knew it was probably some sort of magecraft, but he had no way of undoing its effect.

“Hm? What’s up, Frau?” asked Shion as she took a sip of post-dinner tea. She was lounging in the guest room when she noticed Frau standing in the doorway.

“Miss Shion, keep doing what you’re doing please. Frau just needs to keep the doors closed.”

“Huh?”

“But don’t worry. It’ll only be for a teeny tiny bit.”

The door shut with a thud. Shion gave it a curious look. Then, figuring it couldn’t be that big of a deal, she shrugged and went back to sipping her tea.

After locking Shion in the guest room, Frau proceeded to search for the final member of their household. Sensing that Rona was currently taking a bath, the fairy decided to leave her be.

Renya had a penchant for taking baths, so he heated up a big tub of water on almost a daily basis. Most people in this world did not heat up a big tub of water on almost a daily basis. People who might have the means included the wealthiest merchants, the nobility, and the royal family itself. It was a pretty small club. The way he saw it, though, if he could somehow magecraft his way to taking daily baths,

then he sure as hell was going to. Neither Shion nor Rona had the habit of bathing regularly, but they followed suit, figuring it was a waste otherwise. Soon, bathing had become a daily household routine.

Frau thought that the sight of Rona after a good bath, her skin flushed and glowing, was wonderfully luscious, so she kept a careful eye on the water temperature to allow for lengthy bouts of comfortable steeping. Only after confirming that bathing conditions were satisfactory did she step out the front door.

The cool evening wind brushed against her cheeks. She quickly shut the door behind her; a chilly house was a big no-no. Then, she snapped her fingers once. With that one gesture, all the windows of the house darkened as their curtains silently slid shut. Those who were inside were now blinded to the outside world. The sudden closing of the curtains probably startled Shion and made her jump. Judging from the loud thud, she must have fallen off the sofa in the process. It didn't seem particularly important, so Frau ignored it.

"Dear visitors, do you hear me? I am Frau, maid to this household." Her voice was even but entirely devoid of emotion. She continued, the calmness of her tone at such odds with her usual demeanor that Renya and the girls' jaws would have dropped if they saw the fairy right now. "As the one charged with keeping the peace in this household, I regret to inform you that I cannot permit the entrance of uninvited visitors through the front door. I ask that you take your leave."





The response came in the form of a silver flash that shot through the darkness and into Frau. With nary a sound, she looked down at the hilt of a dagger jutting out from her chest.

“May I presume this to be your answer?”

Her expression remained unchanged as she placed her hand on the weapon and pulled it out, leaving behind no trace or scar. It was as if the dagger had never entered her at all. She held the blade before her and looked at it. It seemed to be lightly coated in a dark slime.

“I see. Poison. How unseemly,” she said placidly, showing no hint of pain from the injury nor panic from the poison.

“Allow me to venture a guess. You are here on the orders of a parent of one of the students at the school who was taught a harsh lesson by Master. You truly are a hopeless lot.

Despicable, are you not?”

Frau shook her head disappointedly. From the shadows of the trees and plants and fences all around the garden, hushed gasps of surprise could be heard. With icy cold eyes, she looked in their direction.

“You poor little fools, coming here to make an attempt on the lives of my Master and Misses. If any of you presume to leave this place alive,” she said with a low growling laugh, “I urge you to reconsider.”

Her laugh grew louder and louder until she was howling wildly into the darkening sky. It was not at all the laughter of a little girl. The dreadfully uncanny sight chilled the spying intruders to the core.

“*No one* is getting away! Worthless vermin, you dare to breathe before me? Filthy trash, your existence affronts me! Your foul gazes, your vile blades, none of them shall ever touch anyone in this household!”

The trees swayed. The shrubs rustled. The fences cast long shadows across the bare earth. Then, it all came alive.

Hands reached at flailing limbs. Claws tore away skin. And fangs sunk into flesh. Cries of terror filled the garden,

cresting into the ear-splitting shrieks of bodies being ripped apart before the climax of a resounding gulp. A short coda followed, the morbid melody of dying wails fading over the rhythmic percussion of crunching bones. At the brink of nightfall when the light grew dim, what was once a simple garden transformed into a nest of otherworldly horror. The corners of Frau's lips curled up into a crescent. The intruders were likely not amateurs. Nevertheless, they were powerless before the dwellers of this hellish hunting ground.

"Die! Die like the trash you are! Worthlessly! Pointlessly! Erased without a trace! If you wish to blame, then blame the folly of those who hired you and your own foolish selves!"

After the echoes of Frau's voice faded, silence descended upon the shadowy garden. There were no more screams; no more moans. Eventually, Frau spoke again. This time, her voice was exceedingly gentle.

"But ease your hearts, for those worthless bodies of yours shall be kneaded firmly into the earth. Once you are buried, you shall feed my dear little darlings. They are all good girls, so they shall turn every last bit of you into nourishment for their budding flowers."

She unconcernedly threw the dagger she held onto the ground and gently curled up her right hand. Light streamed out of her balled fist. She let out a satisfied breath, delight evident in her features. Slowly, she opened her hand to reveal the clear gemlike crystal that had formed in the middle of her palm.

"I shall use your meaningless lives to further Master's interests. Even the lives of lowly scum can be turned into some money this way."

She took the manastone, made by harvesting the lives of all those who were just slaughtered, and slid it into her skirt pocket. Then, she clapped her hands together.

"...Oopsies. Went a little too far off the rails. Frau's been a bad girl," she whispered regretfully as she gave herself a few quick raps on the head. When she finished, she took a look

around the garden to confirm that everyone was gone. Then, she daintily pattered back into the house.

Renya was still stuck in the dining room, and Shion had probably spilled her tea in spectacular fashion when she fell off her seat. The tea needed to be cleaned quickly. Otherwise, it would leave a stain. A bath towel and a change of clothes needed to be delivered to Rona before she finished her bath. The long steep would probably leave her thirsty, so a drink needed to be prepared as well.

“Maids have so much to do! Frau is a busy little fairy!”

With a grin, she quickly headed toward Renya to release her master from the confines of his dining room.

## Chapter 3: They Departed on a Guild Mission, or So It Was Told

*I wonder if there are any good missions...* wondered Renya as he entered the guild hall. When he saw the crowd gathered in a corner of the room, he stopped.

He was currently, in a word, broke.

After earning his pay, his coffers had been reasonably well-off. The purchase of the house had done significant damage to it. His habit of buying interesting foods and ingredients finished it off. He was also carrying debt, and though his contract forbid people from knocking on his door demanding payment, he'd prefer to have a solution to this problem sooner than later. For the time being, he wasn't yet at risk of falling into poverty. This was primarily because Shion and Rona had been funding him with their savings from before they had met. It wasn't a permanent arrangement, and he needed to find a way to make sure it didn't become one; he had no intention of becoming a professional sugar baby.

The two girls had brushed it off, telling him to think of it as them paying rent. Agreeing with their proposal, however, would infringe upon Renya's masculine ideals. The male ego could, at times, prove to be quite troublesome.

In any case, he needed to make some money. He had considered opening a store, but after being neglected for so long, the store space at home was a filthy mess, broken and cracked in various places. Frau was currently working double time to clean and repair the place. The cleaning was fine, but the repairing raised a question: where was she getting the necessary materials to do the repairs? Upon asking the

fairy, he learned that she had developed her own methods for acquiring funds.

“Frau leveled up, so Frau can make manastones now.”

Apparently, after continuously receiving mana from Renya and compressing it in herself, Frau had gained the ability to crystallize the stored mana. That did not explain what exactly a “level” was, and how it was “upped,” but Renya did not dwell on the question. The manastones were neither large nor very pure, so they didn’t fetch much of a price. Nevertheless, selling them allowed her to earn some pocket change. It could be said that it was actually Renya doing the earning because he was providing the mana. Renya, however, felt that since Frau was the one making the manastones, the earnings belonged to her.

“The crystallization process involves a big loss of mana, so Frau tries not to do it too much.” Frau hung her head a little as she spoke. In a way, her business was slightly sketchy, and she seemed a tad ashamed to admit to Renya that she was effectively trafficking his mana.

“I see. Well, since I can’t even afford to give you an allowance right now, I’d say go for it. As long as it doesn’t interfere with daily life, make as much as you want.”

“The mana Frau gets from Master is both Frau’s food and Frau’s bond with Master. So Frau only uses a teeny tiny bit, and only when Frau is really in trouble.”

Renya patted the smiling fairy on the head. As he did, a question occurred to him.

“By the way, what did you do after locking all of us inside? You said the house was surrounded, but I don’t think anyone showed up.”

“There were visitors,” she said before pausing. Then, after what appeared to be a moment of contemplation, she continued, “But they went bye-bye right away.”

Renya frowned. Was it just him or did Frau just say something odd? What was “went bye-bye” supposed to mean, exactly? He glanced at the fairy. The sight of her

beaming smile convinced him that he was probably overthinking things. This was, after all, an alternate world. Maybe the wording had a different nuance. Whoever they were, if a little girl managed to convince them to leave peacefully, they couldn't have been that much of a menace.

As Renya pulled himself out of his thoughts, he found himself at the corner of the room with the crowd of people. They were gathered before a bulletin board where guild missions were posted. Everyone's attention seemed to be focused on one particular mission. He peeked through the crowd and read the specifics. It was an extermination mission that was taking place at the forest northeast of Kukrika about a half day's walk away. The forest was fairly large — many times the size of Kukrika — and contained the entrance to a dungeon known as the Forest Maze, which supposedly led to the Miasmal Forest. Strangely, the mission itself was rather nonspecific and only involved hunting down monsters that thrived there; it made no demands as to what species. So long as they killed monsters and brought back manastones, they would be rewarded accordingly.

"Not every day you see an extermination mission with no specific target," said someone in the crowd.

There were ongoing missions for the extermination of a number of dangerous monster species. These monsters tended to pose a constant threat to humans that often stemmed from excessive fecundity or deadliness. Missions of this nature had no time limit, and adventurers did not need to register beforehand. Anyone who could prove that they had killed some of the designated species would be rewarded. The inverse implication of this was, of course, that no matter how rare or dangerous a monster might be, killing it would produce no reward if there was no corresponding mission.

Meanwhile, the mission this time did not specify what species of monster to kill. Anything that lived in the forest was fair game. Judging from the murmurs in the crowd, this

was very unusual. The novelty, however, was lost on Renya, who had no sense of what was usual to begin with.

“You think the Forest Maze is close to an outbreak?”

“No way. That place has a low rate of monster spawning relative to its size. There has never been an outbreak at the Maze on record.”

“Were there even any tough monsters in that forest?”

“This might be a good chance to make some quick cash, you know? You just have to kill whatever you see, after all.”

As various adventurers pitched in with their own thoughts, Renya found himself entirely uninterested. The whole matter seemed sketchy to him. He was about to look for a different mission when he heard something that made him stop.

“This reminds me, it’s almost forest octopus-hunting season. Might be worth giving that a shot along the way,” said a middle-aged adventurer with the aura of someone who had years of hard-earned experience. He was stroking his chin with a grin on his face.

“Hey, you,” said Renya as he grabbed the man’s shoulder. The intent look on Renya’s face made the man lean back a little before he answered.

“Y-Yeah?”

“Did you just say ‘season’? Do you mean that thing’s edible?”

“What, you don’t know? All right, listen, my good man.”

The adventurer was then kind enough to tell Renya all about the forest octopuses. Apparently, they were a subspecies of the sea-dwelling octopuses. Like their aquatic brethren, they were eight-armed mollusks, but they happened to live in forests. This was surprising to Renya firstly because octopods existed in this world and secondly because some of them lived on land. Furthermore, forest octopuses could stand and walk on their eight arms. They primarily fed on small animals and, possibly due to their terrestrial nature, their meat was firmer and less watery.

"Land octopuses... How does that even work? Do they breathe with lungs?"

"I can't stand the sea ones, but I love the land ones. Sprinkle on some salt, dry them, then roast them a bit. They're a great snack when drinking."

"Mm. Tell me more."

"You can put them under the sky and turn them into jerky, too. Great for nibbling on. Don't eat them raw, though. Too tough to chew. Also, you can't grill them fresh, either. They'll end up so hard you'll think you're chewing on a shoe."

Presumably, the process of drying activated some sort of enzyme that softened their texture enough for consumption. When it came to animal meat, fresh did not necessarily translate to tasty. Some things, even, were tastiest just before they rotted. Knowing this, Renya did not find it especially surprising that forest octopuses were not to be eaten fresh.

"They're a pain to find, though. And you'll want to be careful because some of them can get pretty big. A friend of mine once found a sucker that was over five meters in length. At that size, it's not guaranteed who eats who."

"Any relationship between their size and their taste?" Renya asked, completely ignoring the implication that they sometimes fed on humans. His attitude made the middle-aged adventurer smile wryly before continuing.

"They're not great when they get too big. Apparently, the babies still taste the best. You dry them whole. Also, I heard you can roast their eggs too, but I've never tried them myself."

"I see... That's good to know. Thanks. Here, treat yourself to a drink," said Renya as he handed the man a few silver coins as a token of gratitude. He didn't have much money left, but he still thought that useful information deserved to be paid for.

"Appreciate it, my good man. If you're going to try your hand at hunting them, don't bother with the little critters."

It's better to chop up a goblin and spread the flesh around. Those suckers are drawn to the smell."

He hadn't expected them to eat goblins as well, but the thought didn't bother him either. He could hardly have tasted the likes of octopuses and mantis shrimps in his previous life if he had been so squeamish.

"I see. You've been a great help. Thanks for everything."

Renya gave a quick bow, thanked the man again, and headed home, his head filled with thoughts of forest octopus trapping.

"So, we're doing a guild mission, and we're going to hunt ourselves some forest octopuses while we're at it," declared Renya.

The first thing he had done after getting home was to gather Shion and Rona to make his announcement. Neither of the two girls had any idea what he was talking about, forcing him to summarize the events at the guild.

"Oh, those things. Yeah, those are a delicacy," said Shion, nodding together with Rona. "The forest is huge and there's not too many of them. On top of that, monsters roam around there, so they're hard to find on the market. There's basically only one supply chain for taverns and diners, and that's getting them directly from adventurers, so they're pretty expensive."

Shion continued to explain that they might have made for a decent business if they could be caught en masse and sold wholesale. Unfortunately, due to their rarity, merchants didn't like to carry them. She did not hide the disappointment in her tone.

"I've also only tried them on a handful of occasions, but I do remember them to be quite good. They were dried raw and cut into thin slices for a salad. I've also had them pickled. Oh, and there was a time when they were chopped up and cooked with a crop from the west called arroz. That was delicious as well."

“Arroz?”

“Um...” Rona put a finger to her chin, looking like she was trying to recall some old memories. “They’re tiny white grains used to make alcohol and vinegar.”

Her words hit Renya with the force of a bull. Only with an effort of will did he prevent his shock from showing on his face.

She was almost certainly referring to rice.

Renya might be an amnesiac, but he was a Japanese amnesiac. Bread and pasta might fill his stomach, but only rice warmed his heart. Being in a different world, he was already prepared to never see rice again. Thinking back on it, though, wheat flour existed here. There was also plenty of vinegar in the markets, so it should have been a foregone conclusion that the precursor to vinegar — rice — existed as well. Feeling slightly disappointed by his own oversight, he focused his thoughts on emphasizing how participating in the mission normally would be profitable as well.

“Even if we don’t catch any, the guild will reward us for killing monsters. If we clean the place out, we’ll at least make some money.”

“Not a bad idea.”

With Shion in agreement and no further opposition, it was quickly decided that they would depart in two days.

The forest they came to was referred to as... the forest. The place had no particular name. According to Shion, it really was just a regular old forest.

Renya estimated Kukrika to be about four kilometers from end to end, based on the fact that a slow walk through the city took about an hour. This meant Kukrika occupied an area of approximately sixteen square kilometers. Since the forest was big enough to fit a couple of Kukrikas, it was likely at least sixty to eighty square kilometers in size. In his previous world, thirty square kilometers of trees would be enough to deserve a name and a plaque. Here, a place twice

that size was “just some forest.” It was another one of those moments when he really felt the alternate world culture gap.

From Shion and Rona’s point of view, this forest wasn’t worth naming. The Miasmal Forest, where Renya first made his appearance in this world, was a couple hundred times bigger. Compared to that, the place before them really did seem like a dinky little patch of trees.

Normally, it was a quiet forest rarely traversed by people. But thanks to the sudden influx of adventurers, there was now a fair bit of commotion in the area.

“Geez, just how many freaking parties decided to show up?” said a slightly annoyed Renya as he put his hands on his hips.

His attire was different from usual, consisting of a long black top with an intricate pattern of silver thread woven into the hem. His pants were also black, and he wore his usual leather chest guard, arm guards, and iron-reinforced boots on top. Frau had come to him the before they left and handed him new clothes, saying she had made them overnight. Rona, rather tactlessly, proceeded to wonder aloud whether fairies needed sleep. Shion responded by jamming her elbow into her insensitive friend.

When he took the clothes from Frau and ran his hand across it, Renya realized that he had no idea what they were made of. He stared at the fairy, who bashfully rubbed her hands together before explaining that Silkies were originally expert tailors whose skill with threads were second to none. She then proudly declared that she had taken the fibers of a grass she grew in the garden and the silk of a certain creature that lived in the garden, and used her mana to weave them into a special thread to make the cloth. Upon learning this, all eyes except Frau’s became fixed on the garden. It seemed no different than any other garden of a large house. That did not stop them from sharing the same exact thought: what in the world was happening in that garden?

“Silkworms?” asked Shion with an expression that suggested even she didn’t think so.

“Nn-nn, silk is nice and soft on the skin but not resilient enough.”

It was one thing for clothes to be able to survive some wear and tear, but no one else was entirely sure if they needed to be “resilient.” Frau, oblivious to the thoughts of the others, began to describe in detail just how resilient the clothes she gave Renya were. Taking her claims at face value, the clothes apparently conferred a moderate amount of resistance to heat and cold while also being capable of self-cleaning and self-repair. Despite being cloth, it could guard against sudden impacts through an automatic and reversible hardening process. In addition, it could trap blades and significantly blunt their edges. Basically, it had long abandoned its identity of clothing and crossed over into crazy magical armor territory.

“Doesn’t that mean this is really valuable?”

While the source of the materials was a concern, what worried Renya more was whether Frau had put herself in any danger in the process of making the clothes.

“Nn-nn,” replied Frau with a smile. “No worries. If they’re gone, Frau can make lots more.”

Hearing that Frau could make more of the things, Shion and Rona gave each other troubled looks. If she really could, she’d be sounding a death knell for every last tailor in town.

“I see. Thanks then,” said Renya as he patted the fairy on the head, pointedly ignoring the juxtaposition between Frau’s blissful smile and Shion’s gnashing of her teeth.

Though Frau had sent them off with a smile, after arriving at the scene, they were hard pressed to share her good cheer. Disappointment set in as they realized that the sheer number of people in the forest would make it very difficult to earn much reward. Adventurers all loved money; few would pass up an all-you-can-hunt event that rewarded every kill. They had only just entered the forest and there were already

parties squabbling over claims to the spoils of dead monsters, which only worsened the commotion.

"It's going to be tough to hunt anything on the edges of the forest," said Shion as she glanced at a group of people arguing beyond the trees. They stood over the dead body of a kobold — a dog-headed monster that walked on two legs. They were weak creatures that produced manastones inferior to even goblins, and there was a certain despair to the sight of people arguing over who got the kill.

"Anyone have any idea as to where forest octopuses might live?"

"I heard they're generally near water."

"They're amphibious?"

"I don't know what that means, but they apparently don't like it when their body dries out."

*Why'd they leave the water in the first place then?*

Shortly after his mental quip, Renya reconsidered. If they hadn't, he wouldn't be able to catch them; he'd have to ask fishermen.

"There's a small swamp in the middle of the forest, so we can set up camp somewhere nearby."

"A swamp, huh..."

He imagined a gloomy bog, filled with muck and goop. It was a strangely depressing thought. They wouldn't be able to use it as a source of water, and any food they procured would be dirty and tainted with the stench of mud. He was not going to enjoy being there.

There were no obvious paths in the forest, and traversing it without a map proved to be extremely difficult. Normally, trying to walk forward in a straight line would always result in some deviation to the left or right. Shion, however, seemed to have an odd knack for keeping them on track, and she did actually manage to point them straight forward. Rona whispered an offhand comment about how boars charged in straight lines, which earned her a loud and aggressive complaint in the form of a spinning backfist.

For about an hour, Shion led them forward through the dense undergrowth. When they got very close the center of the forest, they happened upon a clearing that contained a swamp, its water tinted green. Renya kneeled at the edge and put a finger in the water. He grimaced at the slightly thick texture. He then put his finger to his nose and found that it didn't smell that muddy. The water was cleaner than he'd thought. Still, he doubted the thickness and smell would go away even if he boiled and filtered it. The water was definitely not drinkable.

Above him, a hole in the forest canopy allowed him to see the blue sky beyond. It was a change from the dense overgrowth they had walked under for the past while. Though he couldn't see the sun, the blueness of the sky told him that they still had some time before sundown.

"The plan was to spend a night here, so we'll have to set up camp... I sort of want to do a bit of hunting first, though."

"That might be tough. Thanks to all the adventurers who rushed in here, the monsters all ran away," said Shion with a frown.

They were deeper in the forest now, which shielded them from the noise at the fringes. The widescale hunting of monsters, however, sent said monsters fleeing for cover. They were probably all in hiding now, waiting for the storm to pass.

"Rather than hunting a bunch of little things, it might be more efficient to aim for a big one," said Renya, remembering when he defended the settlers' village against goblins. His kill count had reached triple digits that time, and he was not exactly swimming in money afterward.

"Famous last words, Renya. Especially for adventurers," cautioned Shion.

Renya paused and awkwardly scratched his neck.

*Touché.*

He took a small stone from the ground and stood up. Shion gave him a questioning look. With a quick action of

the wrist, he flicked the stone into a patch of grass. There was a low, dull thud followed by a soft, shrill cry. He took out a knife and approached the patch of grass. A ball of brown fur, just about big enough for one to get their arms around it, was squatted on the ground. Its eyes were spinning after being hit on the head by the stone. He stuck the knife into what he thought was its neck, and it stopped moving.

"A giant rat, huh. Pretty big catch."

Dangling it by its legs, it looked to be a mouse-like creature about 50 centimeters in length.

"Is this a monster too?"

"Nah, that's an animal. You won't find a manastone inside."

Apparently, monsters and animals were differentiated based on whether or not they had manastones inside their bodies.

"And what about forest octopuses?" Renya didn't really care either way, but asked just for the sake of it.

"Also an animal, also no manastone. But it's pretty aggressive and sometimes attacks people."

It was something that he, a stranger to this world, might never figure out just by looking.

He lowered the giant rat's body onto the ground and began taking it apart with his knife. He had considered having a taste of his first catch, but then he remembered all the food he brought with him from town. Since there was no need to eat it, the best use for its body was probably as bait for forest octopuses. The adventurer at the guild had told him that goblins were best, but those goblins were unfortunately busy being slaughtered by a bunch of Renya's money-starved colleagues. He could have asked them to give him the corpses, but he didn't want to deal with people giving him weird looks and guessing at what he was scheming.

Had he intended to eat the rat, he would have first cut its head off and hung it upside down to drain the blood.

According to the information he was given, though, forest octopuses were drawn to the smell, so he purposefully left the blood in. After chopping it up, a raw smell began to drift from the dismembered chunks. The scent of blood might attract more than just forest octopuses, but he decided that if any other monsters showed up, he'd just chop them up for money too, so he left the smell alone.

Next, he looked in his inventory and took out the shovel he bought in town. He walked over to the very edge of the swamp and began digging a hole in the ground. When Shion and Rona saw what Renya was up to, they figured that they probably weren't going to get anything else done that day, so they started setting up camp nearby. They picked a place that was reasonably far from the swamp. Being too close ran the risk of being disturbed by something that popped out of the water. The wetness itself was also uncomfortable.

Renya's digging proceeded smoothly. The earth near the water was soft, and he was soon standing in a waist-deep hole. He reached into his inventory again, pulled out a tall pot, and buried it in the ground so that only the opening was exposed. The pieces of the giant rat went in, along with a scoop of swamp water. That was all it took to create a land version of the classic trap — the octopus pot.

Gauging his distance from the camp, he chose positions where the light of a campfire would not reach to dig more holes, eventually finishing with a total of ten. Normally, octopus pots were placed horizontally and provided a hiding spot for octopuses. Once an octopus settled in, the pot would be retrieved with the prey in tow. The original process did not actually involve any bait, but Renya was working on limited knowledge, so he made it up as he went along.

If he failed, then so be it. He wouldn't be too upset.

"If we don't catch any forest octopuses, we'll have to do some real hunting tomorrow," murmured Renya to himself. Even if he did catch some, he still needed to hunt down a good number of monsters. Otherwise, he wouldn't make

enough from this mission to cover the costs of the equipment he bought. Problems, problems. He put them out of his mind.

The surface of the swamp shimmered faintly, and orange light danced among the swaying leaves. He looked up at the reddening glow of the evening sky.

If life was a song, this was his coda. Just a long epilogue. An extra chapter. A bonus end. He had nothing to prove, and no one to prove it to. Why put in effort? Where was the need?

Shion and Rona were invested in him, and he felt a little sorry for them. But, if the day came when they found their hopes in him thoroughly betrayed, they could simply leave. He would not keep them.

*It would be a pity, though.*

Hiding in the shadows of the trees, Renya smiled thinly to himself.

Night had fallen over their camp.

A soft noise outside their tent woke Renya, and he opened his eyes. His sleeping bag was warm and comfortable. His eyelids drooped. He almost drifted away into sleep again before he forced his eyes open and kept himself awake.

The campfire crackled outside. The shadows of its flame danced on the fabric of the tent.

*The tent.*

Once again, they put up only one, and once again, they bickered over it. It was almost the exact same argument they had as when they went on the dungeon mission. In a fit of desperation, he made his “one of these days, I really am going to take you for a spin” threat again. Like last time, Rona smiled confidently and beckoned him with her hand. Shion blushed, but made no obvious attempt to refuse.

He loudly decried their terrible taste in men, but to no avail. It was little more than bluff and bluster — the pitiful baying of a fangless wolf. The only thing he managed to do

was expose his own helplessness.

Their patrol rotation was Renya, Rona, then Shion. Renya opposed this on the grounds that it was harsh on Rona, but Rona insisted. Her reasoning was that Shion was probably going to latch onto him anyway, and this order allowed her to pull Shion off him when they switched shifts. It also meant she could respond quickly to any emergencies. Finding that he had no counter-arguments, Renya looked at Shion, who was scratching her head with the stupidest of smiles on her face, looking not the least bit repentant. Apparently, the Shion sleep-hug was already a confirmed event on their overnight itinerary.

He clenched his fist with the intent of giving Shion a nice solid one across the jaw. His resolve evaporated, however, when Rona enviously said that he got all the perks, and the order was finalized.

Renya pulled himself halfway out of his sleeping bag and looked to the side. The blurry image of Rona slumbering peacefully in her sleeping bag found its way into his sleepy eyes. If Rona was beside him, that meant Shion was on patrol duty right now. He crawled out of his sleeping bag, put his outerwear and sword belt back on, and pulled the tent's door flap open slightly. Shion's head popped in.

"Are you being a good boy in there?" she asked, trying to suppress a laugh.

He closed his eyes and allowed the feeling of "I'm going to kill you" to pass.

"Don't make me hurt you... What's the matter?"

He unsheathed his katana slightly in an intimidating manner. Shion either didn't get the message or was well aware it was an empty threat. She grinned, completely unaffected.

"Leaving the jokes aside for a minute, I think something's going on in the forest."

"Those jokes of yours are going to be the end of you one day, you know? Anyway, what do you mean, something's

going on?”

“I don’t know. It’s just a feeling. Something doesn’t feel right.”

It must have been a very vague feeling. Shion didn’t seem entirely confident in her own perception. Regardless, Renya immediately shook Rona awake. She yawned a little and opened her eyes.

“What seems to be the matter?”

Her sleepy countenance was betrayed by the clarity in her voice. Renya noted it, treating it as a reminder that former knights were not to be taken lightly.

“Shion feels that something is wrong. It’s not certain, but it’s worth checking out.”

“Understood.”

Rona gave a curt answer and quickly sat up, pulling her sleeping bag down to her waist. Having taken off her priest robes to sleep, she was currently in her underwear. Her sudden rise caused a pair of objects to jump out in front of them. There was a weightiness to the way they swayed. The voluminous presence demanded the gazes of Renya and Shion, giving neither of them any say in the matter.

“Wait, it’s one thing for me to be staring, but why are *you* staring too?”

“Oh, um,” stammered Shion, “I’m just, you know... sort of impressed.”





“Now, now, you two, let’s keep some tension in the air,” said Rona, chuckling. She swiftly geared up, completely unfazed by her gawking onlookers. The deftness of her movement, however, spoke to the nature of both her current and past professions.

“Pack this camp up. We’re going to scout the surroundings. Put out the campfire too. We’ll use a more controlled light.”

“What about the pots, Renya?” asked Shion.

Renya grimaced. After spending so long setting the pots up, it pained him to leave them behind.

“I want to go grab them... but I doubt we have the time.”

“Why not go pick them up then? We’ll go dig them out.”

Shion casually held out her hand and motioned at him to give her the shovel. He hesitated.

“I don’t believe there’s any reason to rush right now. What seems to be the problem?”

“Yeah. We’re wasting more time waiting on you, Renya.”

Rona held out her hand and asked for a shovel as well. With doubt still lingering in his mind, Renya took out two shovels from his inventory.

“Right, we’ll go dig those pots out.”

“Renya, we’ll leave the tent to you, then. All right?”

Before he could answer, the two were already heading toward the pots. Figuring that he’d only waste time by saying more, he immediately started folding up the tent and returning it to his inventory.

“Ew! Renya! It’s gross how many of them are in here! They’re li— Hey! You! Stop sucking on to me!”

“Big ones, small ones... You’ve got quite the selection here.”

*So much for keeping tension in the air,* thought Renya to himself as he brought out cloth and string from his inventory.

“Here. Use the cloth the cover the pot opening and tie it with string. I’ll throw them in my voidbox after.”

“Got it. This sure is one heck of a good haul, though.”

“Coming here was well worth it, wasn’t it?”

“You know, this might be weird coming from me, but the two of you sure are laid-back, aren’t you...”

The pots were filled with octopuses of various sizes. So much for being hard to find. Renya had no idea whether his bait had good effect or the octopuses simply had a habit of gathering in places like these to rest, and he didn’t intend to think too hard on it. He had caught plenty, and that was all that mattered. If he had to guess at the reason for his large haul, it would be a lack of exposure. No adventurers focused on hunting forest octopuses, and he doubted there were fishermen who specialized in them either. As a result, they probably hadn’t been trained to be wary of things like traps.

He put the sealed pots into his inventory.

Had he not taken the time to do some experiments beforehand, the storage of the octopuses might have presented a problem. Thanks to his testing, he had learned that he couldn’t put living things directly into his inventory. A picked flower went in without problems, but a potted plant was barred. There was, however, a loophole to this rule that he discovered. When he wrapped it completely in a container such as a box, he could store it as a “box (potted plant inside).” It occurred to him he might be able to apply the same logic to a “box (human inside),” but he never worked up the nerve to ask Shion or Rona for help with his experiment. The transportation of humans in voidboxes, therefore, currently remained within the realm of conjecture.

“So, Renya, what next?” asked Shion after seeing the last octopus pot vanish from his hand.

“For now, we’ll start heading back toward the outer edges of the forest. Slow and steady. If anyone sees or feels anything weird, speak up immediately.”

“I know I’m the one who said it, but should we really be moving based on a gut feeling that something was wrong?”

It was true that Shion’s feeling was nothing more than

just that — a feeling. There was no concrete evidence. Nevertheless, Renya deemed that enough to warrant packing up their camp and moving. Rona also made no objection. From Shion's perspective, it must have seemed baffling for them to make such a fuss about a simple hunch.

"If nothing happens, then that's fine. We don't lose anything," replied Renya as he quickcast an *Illuminate* in the palm of his hand with the brightness toned down. He had recently tried this as a part of his training regimen and discovered that he could simply make a fist to block off the light. It was a very practical application of the spell. He planted an orb in both Shion's and Rona's hands as well.

"The problem is if something *does* happen, so whenever anyone raises a concern, we follow up on it regardless. It's better to err on the side of caution. You can call me a coward, but I'd rather be a coward than dead."

"Is that... how it's usually done?"

"Don't ask me. I don't know what's usually done."

Renya could only stand there and shrug when the topic turned to generalities and common rhetoric. With no memories of his past life, he couldn't even figure out what his previous self would have done. Perhaps old Renya would have laughed up a storm had he seen what new Renya was doing. He had pondered the thought on more than one occasion, always to no avail.

"Enough talking. Let's move."

"Sure."

Both girls responded simultaneously with a nod.

Renya took the lead and began making his way through the forest. The dense canopy swallowed most of the pale moonlight, allowing little to reach the ground. For all of Renya's wondrous abilities, even he couldn't see in the dark, so he had no choice but to feel his way forward, aided by the tiny amount of light from the orb in his hand. As they advanced, he also had to watch their rear. Needless to say, progress was slow. Perhaps owing to her prior training, Rona

proved to be reasonably agile, but Shion was a total amateur at traversing the darkness. The limited vision granted by the dim glow in Shion's hand wasn't nearly enough for her to walk properly, and Renya was treated to a string of yelps and moans as she bumped her head and scratched her face on low-hanging branches. Eventually, he grabbed her shoulder.

"Renya..."

"Put your hand on my shoulder. Keep it there. Follow me. And don't pull on my clothes. It stops me from reacting quickly."

"Sorry," whispered Shion as she did as she was told, "and thanks."

Renya gave her hand a few gentle pats.

"It's fine. This kind of thing just takes some getting used to."

"Getting used to, huh..."

"That's right. After you get the hang of it, people will start asking you how you do it, and you'll get to tell them to just get a feel for it, too. That's how skills work," said Renya before adding in a whimsical tone, "The trick is that nobody actually knows how they do it, and everyone just keeps kicking the ball down the line."

The statement drew a laugh from Shion. Meanwhile, Rona was eyeing the two of them enviously.

"Renya, I'd like to hold your shoulder as well."

Rona's request was pointedly ignored.

"Renya!"

"Oh shut up already. Look, you're walking fine without help, aren't you?"

"Yes, but I don't *feel* fine."

"Ugh, I can't be dragging both of you. I won't be able to mo— Wait."

He abruptly stopped talking and gestured at Rona. Not missing a beat, she immediately fell silent and followed his gaze, her prior playfulness gone without a trace. The sudden

shift in atmosphere caught Shion completely off guard, and her eyes darted frantically in all directions, unable to figure out what the other two were looking at.

"Something moved... Seemed pretty big."

Renya peered into the darkness ahead. He couldn't see clearly, but he noticed movement. Rona appeared to have felt the same.

"I believe I heard metal. A person, perhaps?"

"Huh? What? Where?"

To help the struggling Shion, Renya directed the light in his palm in the direction where he saw something move. Behind him, Rona closed her hand and snuffed out her own light.

"There. Can you see?"

Shion stared for a while before shaking her head.

"...Sorry. I still can't."

"Don't worry. It takes some practice," said Renya, comforting his disappointed friend.

"Renya, I believe it's coming toward us."

"You can tell? Damn. Can you see what it is?"

"Unfortunately... I suspect it's a person, but I can't tell much more in this darkness."

Indecision stuck Renya. He could put out more light and immediately figure out what was ahead. If it was something dangerous, though, he would also be revealing his own position and attracting the thing's attention. Conversely, he could remain under the cover of darkness and wait for the thing to leave, but there was a chance that it was moving toward them, as well as the possibility that it didn't rely on sight to sense its environment. In that case, they would be at a terrible disadvantage. While he mulled over his options, the thing had come much closer to them. He could hear it trampling the grass underfoot.

"What should we do, Renya?"

"Let's light it up. We'll get a good look at it. If it's big and ugly, we scream and run for our lives. Good plan?"

“Good plan.” Shion nodded.

“It’s your call,” said Rona. “I’ll leave the timing of the light to you, then?”

“Sure. We don’t want it to get too close either. Makes it harder to get away. I’ll give you a cue.”

After whispering about the plan with the two girls, Renya focused his attention on the darkness ahead. If the thing was too far away, he risked not being able to see it clearly. If the thing was too close, they might not be able to escape. It was a delicate balance. He waited, and waited. Then, feeling like it was time, he spoke to the two behind him.

“Get ready to run if I tell you to. I’m throwing up the lights. Shield your eyes so you’re not looking straight at them. You’ll blind yourself.”

Renya waited until he saw the two girls bring hands over their eyes. Then, he aimed at a branch as far away from them as possible and cast *Illuminate* on it. Set to normal duration and moderate intensity, the glowing orb washed away the darkness of night and granted vision of the forest.

Something stood in the light. Shion gulped. Rona pressed her hand to her mouth to stifle a scream.

At first, Renya thought it was some sort of undead. Surrounded by the forest’s shadow, its sickly skin seemed all the paler in the bright artificial light. Even from a distance, it looked pallid and deathly, its bloodless white flesh resembling that of a corpse. Yet bloodless it was not. Streaks of liquid red flowed freely down its ashen body — the sign of grave injury. Its chest rose and fell, labored breaths signaling it was yet alive.

An undead’s heart did not beat. It did not bleed, much less breathe. However, despite the multiple signs of life it displayed, Renya was loath to believe they were looking at a living human. He watched as the ghastly figure shambled unsteadily toward them. Its foot caught in the undergrowth and it swayed before leaning on a nearby trunk for support.

He knew he was probably looking at a female adventurer,

but the sight of her defied explanation. Her shoulder-length hair retained little of its golden luster, replaced by the dark glow of something viscous and oily that coated its disheveled strands. Her blue eyes were hollow and glazed. Renya couldn't tell if she saw them, or if she even saw anything at all. The tattered remnants of what once might have been leather armor dangled from her waist. Her undershirt had been torn to pieces, and what remained on her no longer functioned as clothing, exposing much of her unnaturally pale skin.

Slowly, the female figure approached them. Bite and scratch marks covered her body. Dark bruises — the kind caused by intense pressure — ran up and down her right arm. They were in the shape of hands. Her left arm was not bruised; it was simply gone. Renya's gaze drifted downward. Her stomach looked painfully bloated, almost as if pregnant. But she couldn't be; no one with child would wander the forest at night in armor. Further below, she was completely naked, and countless thin red marks could be seen where the grass and shrubs took their toll. Those dark hand-shaped bruises also covered her legs from knee to ankle. Her thighs were in worse shape, where teeth and fangs left little flesh untormented.

Renya's mind blanked. He felt his foot slide back a step. Keeping Shion and Rona behind him, he tried to piece these thoughts back together. What had violated this woman so?

"...Was she attacked by a goblin or something?" The words leaked out of Renya's mouth.

"I doubt it," said Rona as she tightened her two-handed grip on her mace. "While goblins and orcs kidnap women for breeding, I've never heard of their victims suffering abuse this horrible."

Her eyes were focused on the woman's left shoulder, where a mere stump of an arm remained. It had not been cut off by a sharp blade. The wound was ugly, and the severed ends of the tissue were wildly frayed.

"That left arm of hers... was probably bitten off," said Rona.

"So it eats people... Ogres, then? But... were there monsters like that in this forest?" asked a slightly unnerved Shion. She looked conflicted. While she clearly wanted to get away, she seemed hesitant to abandon the woman before them and leave her to her agony.

"What are the characteristics of ogres?" asked Renya. He kept his eyes on the approaching woman and moved his left hand to his katana.

"More than three meters tall. Strong and stupid and eats a ton." Rona kept her answer concise, providing only the most relevant details.

After hearing Rona's description, Renya shook his head at Shion's suggestion.

"Can't be ogres then. Look at the bruises on that girl. The fingers are human-sized. More importantly, if they eat a ton, they're not going to walk away after chewing off one arm."

"The bite marks seem like they came from some sort of beast... but nothing explains why her stomach is so big."

"Either way..."

She was a goner.

The words formed in his mind. They had just reached his mouth when a scream from the woman caused him to freeze.

"Eeeugh... Auggh... Eeeeeaaaaaaagh!"

Her knees hit the ground and she arched her back. Her one remaining arm was pressed tightly against her bulging stomach as she let out an agonized shriek. Then, her stomach throbbed. Again. And again, undulating as though something squirmed on the inside. At this point, even Renya felt the color draining from his face.

"Watch out! She's keeping something in her stomach!"

"Actually, I'm pretty sure she's not *keeping* it there, Renya."

"Gah! How the hell are you so unreasonably calm right now, Shion?!"

Stretched to its limit, her stomach finally gave way. The pressure from within ripped its flesh apart, and a gruesome mess of fluid burst out the new openings. Some of it was blood. Some wasn't. The woman kept screaming, her voice growing more and more strained.

"All right, let's make a bet: whatever comes out of there, it's going to be bad news. Who's in?" asked Renya with a panicked smile. The two girls nodded.

"I am. Ten gold on it being bad news," answered Rona.

"Me too. Ten gold on bad news." Shion joined in, making a fist with her hand.

Renya sighed wearily.

"We can't all bet on the same thing. Then it's not a bet. Also, you two are surprisingly calm, aren't you?"

"Well, I personally am dying to hear you to give the order to run, Renya..."

"I want to help her..." said Shion before her expression clouded. "But I guess there's no way we can."

Neither Renya nor Rona had the composure to be sharing Shion's concern.

There was no pause to the woman's screaming; no lull in her agony. She pushed harder against her rupturing stomach as her fingers began scratching wildly at its surface. Her nails began to tear through the skin. Gashes opened from gashes, old ripped into new. Fluid oozed out of her body, soaking the earth. A pungent odor began to permeate the surroundings.

At this point, Renya decided that his danger threshold had finally been breached. He was just about to give the order to run when he noticed that a number of silhouetted figures had appeared behind the woman and were running toward them. More specifically, they seemed to be running away from something. Further behind them, something big was moving. Each thump of its heavy steps was accompanied by the cracking of the twigs and grasses it flattened.

“Renya, there’s something else coming!”

“Don’t bother checking! We’re getting out of here! Run!”

Renya spun around and gave the two girls an urgent shove on the back. He watched them nod at his signal and dash off. A second later, he followed suit. He had only taken a few steps forward when the forest went quiet; the woman’s screaming suddenly stopped. There was a split second’s silence, followed by the sound of a wet cloth being ripped. Then, something hit the ground with a splat.

“Wah! What the hell is this?!”

“Don’t stop, you dumba— Eeugh! It’s coming this way... N-No... Gyaaaaaaah!”

Men’s voices cried out in alarm behind Renya. They probably found themselves stuck between the big thing pursuing them and whatever popped out of the woman’s stomach. Renya, however, didn’t stop running. He didn’t even turn to look; he had no intention of finding out what any of those things were. All his attention was focused on one thing only: figuring out if anything dangerous lay before them.

“What... was that?”

“Don’t talk, Rona. You’ll run out of breath. Shion! Keep going straight! Rona, stay close to Shion!”

Behind him, Renya could hear noises. Something wet was squished. There was a snap — the splitting of both meat and bone. If he focused, he could hear screams of agony and cries of help coming from various directions in the forest. Stealth was no longer an option, so Renya cast another Illuminate on Shion’s left palm, cranking the brightness to high.

“Shion! Use the light in your left hand!”

“Got it!”

She opened her left hand and held it high, using the light to guide her path. Rona was close behind, and Renya brought up the rear. As he followed the two girls, he felt a growing sense of unease. They were supposed to be moving

toward the outer edge of the forest, but their frantic escape reversed their direction. Right now, they were running ever deeper toward the forest's center.

"Shion, turn! I don't care which way! Ninety degrees left or right, you choose!"

"Okay!"

Shion threw her hand against a thin tree and executed a masterful cornering maneuver. Rona, too close on Shion's heels, couldn't react in time to the sudden change in direction and ended up stumbling, but was aided by Renya who swept her up by the waist. Together, the two of them managed to make the turn without losing any time.

"Sorry, Renya. It's okay. I can run."

"Good. I'd rather not sprint while carrying a person on me."

He slowed his pace a little and let go. Rona slid smoothly out of his arms and hit the ground running. Her long and skirt-like priest robe should have been ill-suited for such acrobatics, but it didn't stop Rona from matching Shion's speed. Renya found himself impressed by the robe's design. Evidently, those deep slits up each side of its lower skirt were not only for show.

"Renya, what should we do next?" asked Rona during their desperate dash.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, given these extraordinary circumstances, what should be our next move?"

"Huh? Bit of a redundant question, don't you think?"

Rona frowned in confusion. Clearly, she did not consider the question redundant. Shion, however, had a pretty good idea what Renya was about to say.

"We run until we get out of this forest, and then we keep running until we make it back to town."

Shion, having expected Renya's answer, sighed a little. While the things happening around them were definitely not

normal, Renya undoubtedly saw no obligation for them to investigate the cause or fight whatever was out there. Personally, she would rather not abandon the people in the forest and flee, but she found herself somewhat understanding of Renya's position. From Renya's perspective, he would be putting his friends in danger to help people whom he neither knew nor cared about. That was not a risk he was willing to take.

"Renya... what if there are people hurt out there?"

"You think we can take them with us? Are you hiding a secret horse wagon somewhere? Because otherwise, I don't see how we can possibly carry them."

Of course, even if they miraculously procured a wagon, they'd be faced with the rather impossible hurdle of trying to navigate it through a forest. Rona nodded, evidently satisfied with Renya's reasoning.

Shion, however, found Renya's matter-of-fact approach a bitter pill to swallow. She knew they'd call her naive for thinking so. She was also well aware that Renya's view was correct given the current circumstances. Nevertheless, she stood her ground — literally, by planting down her feet and stopping.

"Renya, I have a request."

Seeing that their lead had come to a halt, Renya and Rona stopped as well.

"I can't just run away like this," Shion said as she turned toward Renya. "I won't ask you to save everyone, but I want to at least find out what's going on. This place isn't that far from town. If we leave this alone and run, whatever's happening here might end up harming the city."

She stepped right up to Renya and fixed him with a firm stare. He returned her gaze. There was a silent pressure to the way he looked at her, and Shion had to stop herself from shrinking away. At the same time, she could tell he was waiting for her to continue.

"Please, Renya. Help me with this."

She already knew how he would respond. Despite that, she still had to ask. She had to try.

Renya kept his eyes on Shion, his expression unchanging. With his right finger, he quietly scratched his cheek.

## Chapter 4: The Fool Had Company, or So It Was Told

“Just to be sure, let me ask you this.”

When Renya finally spoke, his tone was calm. It was an unexpected calmness that Shion instead found unsettling, and she wilted a little in fear. Her eyes unwittingly drifted toward the katana that hung from his waist. Noticing the direction of her gaze, Renya followed it to its target. He sighed.

“We haven’t known each other for long, but you know what kind of person I am and how I think, right?”

His voice bore no emotion, as though he were simply confirming facts. Shion nodded.

“Yeah. I’m pretty sure I do.”

“So, you know... and you still want to make that request?”

His gaze turned the slightest bit harsh. It was a very small gesture — a simple narrowing of the eyes — but it was enough for Shion to feel like a bucket of freezing water had been poured down through her body, chilling her from head to toe. A part of Shion screamed at her to apologize and take back everything she said. In that moment, she desperately wanted say sorry. To claim it was a joke. To say “No.”

But she didn’t.

“Yes, I do. I want you to help me, Renya.”

Never had her own voice sounded so powerless to her. Her words rang hollow; they were the preachings of a fanciful idealist. She was not only flaunting virtuousness, but she was also keeping Renya and Rona from moving. She was putting all of them in grave danger. Still, she couldn’t relent. There were reasons for her insistence, but she couldn’t

decide if she should tell them to Renya. A glance of appeal for help at Rona earned her little more than a troubled frown.

Rona was conflicted. Her status and position required her to stand with Shion, but her prudence pushed her to avoid putting Shion in danger. She couldn't even go with her heart, because her heart was split evenly between the two choices. In a way, she hoped that Renya would reject the idea outright. For him, that should seem like the surest method to bring Shion in line.

Shion knew this, too. In fact, it was all the more vexing, because she could see Renya's thought process and still had no way of arguing back. She could, of course, reveal her identity, but even she knew that would have almost no effect on Renya's decision. Currently, nothing she could say would change the fact that what she was proposing seemed like utter nonsense — the blind wish of a fool. Frustration and discouragement bubbled up to her throat, choking her to the point of tears. She angrily chided herself in her mind. Shedding tears made her a fool, but to use tears against a man was even worse. If nothing else, she wanted him to know that she was being earnest. She looked Renya in the eyes, hoping to convey at least the sincerity of her plea.

Were Shion able to read Renya's thoughts at this moment, though, she would find them utterly disconnected from her own. The truth was that Renya saw Shion as nothing more than a babe in the woods, her head filled with rainbows and butterflies. He deemed her incapable of correctly analyzing a situation, and for whatever reason, she was reluctant to abandon people in need. It might be idealism, but in all honesty, he didn't mind. If anything, he far preferred the active idealist to the passive cynic. Whatever their true intentions, at least the former tried to do some objective good. Compared to the armchair experts who spent all day extolling the virtues of things they've never done, he'd take the idealist every time.

He thought of the young girl who sent him to this world.

In that sense, that damn loli-god could stand to learn a thing or two from Shion. Due to these factors, nothing about their current situation was unexpected for Renya. It was, however, a little disappointing that Shion had caught on to the need for investigation and the possibility of rescue. He tsked. So much for taking advantage of all the confusion to keep everyone running.

Now that the topic had been brought up, he had two options.

One, he could turn her down flat. Even with Rona's help, there was very little that their three-person makeshift rescue party could do. Chances were, they'd simply have the privilege of experiencing the process of being ripped apart from the inside out for themselves.

Two, he could agree to her request. He didn't consider himself to be all that amazing, but so long as he was with the two girls, he did feel confident in his ability to keep them safe. For some reason, though, it felt very unlike him to be doing that.

He could do it, but he didn't *need* to do it.

With a sigh, he conceded that he wasn't suited to deal with these kinds of situations. This wasn't a fairy tale, and he wasn't the knight in shining armor here to swear fealty to his beloved princess. It simply wasn't him. The thought made him a little depressed. Nevertheless, he knew he wasn't the protagonist type, so he wasn't going to be doing cool, protagonist-y things. Instead, he focused his thoughts on what he — regular old Renya — should be doing.

In actuality, he had long given up on saying no to Shion's request. There were various reasons, but the most important one was that he knew they were mutually dependent. Just as Shion relied on him, so did he on her.

A stranger in strange lands, he was utterly alone in this new world. This fact troubled him on a daily basis. Being reborn in an alternate world might sound fun on paper, but in practice, it was nothing more than an exercise in

loneliness. He had no family, no kin, not even the eighteen years of life his bodily age suggested. He was ninety-four on the inside, but he had left his ninety-four years worth of memories and bonds in a distant grave of a faraway world. In other words, he was a spectre; an empty soul. No matter where he went, the being known as Renya Kunugi would remain alien to this world.

When he wallowed in such thoughts, only the presence of Shion and Rona offered him some relief. He had, of course, slowly gained more ties in the form of friends and a maid. The first people to extend their hands and ask for his friendship, however, were these two girls. Undoubtedly, they had their motives for doing so; they were human, after all. Asking strangers for their unconditional charity was mere greed.

*Besides, he thought wryly, if I laugh at Shion for being a fool who has far more compassion than competence, what does that make me?*

He was the one who had listened while the young girl mourned the impending destruction of a world and the deaths of its countless inhabitants. He was the one who had been talked into crossing its boundary to save the strangers of this strange new world. It was true that refusal meant certain death, and it was true that the promise of delicious food was appealing, but in the end, there was a simple truth: the girl had asked for his help, and he couldn't say no. Knowing the reason why he had become a Wanderer, he couldn't mock Shion for refusing to turn a blind eye. If Shion was a fool, he was one thrice over.

"Renya..."

He heard the soft whisper of Shion's voice. Pulling himself out of his thoughts, he found her peeking gingerly up at him. With a frustrated sigh, he crossed his arms and looked up at the night sky.

*I could sure use a smoke right now...*

He didn't know if he used to smoke. He also didn't know if

he was old enough here to smoke. He didn't even know if this world had cigarettes for him to smoke. But he did know one thing: he'd much rather puff out a thick wisp of tobacco than the dull forest air. It was often said that smoking did nothing but harm, but Renya begged to disagree. Smoking calmed the mind. Surely, that meant it did something that wasn't harm. And that not-harm it did sounded really good to him at this moment in time.

"Let's assume I say yes..."

Renya kept his eyes on the sky. He wasn't sure if he could look at Shion and still keep his composure. Even so, he could imagine the expressions of the two girls. Rona probably looked like she just saw a ghost, and Shion probably looked like a puppy who was just given food. If Shion had a tail, she'd be wagging it as hard as she could.

"In that case, I'm calling all the shots, and you follow orders. Agreed?"

"But... That's..." Shion frowned, her enthusiasm waning dramatically.

Renya had some sympathy for her. She probably realized that he was going to propose a compromise. She simply had to accept that, though. He had his limits, and one of them was risking the lives of people he knew for people he didn't.

"We're not going to start combing through this forest. That might have been a possibility if either of you could move and fight at night like me, but you can't. You'd just be two deadweights. Our lives are on the line here, so I'm going to be very blunt about this."

"Nnngh..."

Shion had no comeback, and he didn't intend to give her any time to think of one.

"It's hard to even walk properly in a forest, never mind swinging weapons around. Meanwhile, our opponent's mobility is apparently unaffected. The terrain is not on our side. Fighting in disadvantageous terrain is equal to suicide."

“Mmm...”

“And even if we ignore all that, there’s still the fact that you’re just plain weak. With the whole getup you’ve got going, you look like you can swing a sword, but let’s face it. You’re a wimp. You can’t think, and you can’t fight, and honestly I’m not even sure what you can do. Sexiness? Rona’s miles ahead of you there. Cuteness? Don’t bother. Frau’s got that covered. Seriously. You’re not even cut out for party mascot.”

“H-Huh?”

“On top of that, you have poor situational awareness and you’re terrible at planning. Do you even understand what we’re about to do? An investigation. Even a kid knows you need skills to do that. Do you see any professionals here? Because I sure don’t. You think a bunch of amateurs can handle a search and rescue operation? Are the three of us going to protect a bunch of injured people while escorting them to safety? You don’t even have the brains to realize what an impossible task this is, so the least you can do is to shut up, listen, and take orders. If I say turn right, you damned well better turn right.”

“U-Um... Renya?”

“Now, of course, that’s my personal opinion. But I think it’s a very good opinion,” said Renya as he leaned in toward his bewildered victim with a menacing glare. “Don’t you?”





Shion panicked.

"Y-Yeah, I do. Totally." Shion nodded, not entirely sure what she was agreeing to.

Renya smiled.

*You said it, not me. We all heard you.*

He secretly reveled in his victory as he began barking orders at her. It was best not to give her time to recover.

"All right. First, we get the hell out of this forest, pronto. Everything else comes later."

Shion nodded in an almost mechanical fashion. He looked to Rona, who had been patiently watching their exchange, and gave her a quick pat on the back. Then, they resumed their escape.

"Renya! What're we going to do after we get out of the forest?" asked Shion as they ran.

Apparently, she still had enough wits about her to ask questions.

"The two of you will keep running until you're back in the city. Once you get there, go to the guild and explain the situation. Tell them a bunch of crazy monsters popped up and a lot of the parties that went on the mission are dead. Then get them to put together an investigation and extermination squad."

"You think they'll listen?" asked Shion worriedly.

She wasn't wrong to worry. It was hard to imagine the higher-ups in the guild rushing to put together an investigation squad just because two fledgling adventurers told them to. This was assuming, of course, that Shion and Rona were actually just fledgling adventurers. He wasn't sure about Shion, but he knew for a fact that Rona, being a knight, should have ways to make people listen.

"Rona, do something about it."

"Understood."

As expected, she immediately nodded.

"Renya, you said the two of us, right? What about you, then?"

It peeved him that for all her denseness, she was quick to notice the things he didn't want her to notice.

"If I went back to town with you, then all three of us would have effectively run away, right?"

"Huh? But..."

He couldn't risk the lives of people he knew for people he didn't. The only life he could risk was that of the one who chose the risk— his own.

"I'll stand guard at the entrance to the forest. I doubt it'll happen, but if those monsters come out of the forest and head for the city, someone needs to hold them back."

"Renya! You can't—"

He didn't let the wide-eyed Shion finish her sentence, speaking right over her protests.

"Shion, remember this. If you insist on doing something you can't handle, you'll just force that burden onto someone else. In the end, that burden may very well end up killing him. I don't know what's behind your obsession with saving others, but if you keep doing things this way, things'll keep playing out the same way again and again."

"Renya... I..."

"Don't bother explaining. I don't need to hear it. You agreed to listen to what I say, so do it."

He stopped Shion from speaking. They kept running as he glanced back to find her looking at him. He smiled.

"Cheer up. We'll say this time is an exception. If you're really worried, hurry up and reach the city so you can send me some reinforcements," he said jokingly. He had hoped to change the way Shion thought, but his string of harsh words left him feeling a little sorry for her, so he decided to end things on a lighter tone.

A strong gust blew past Renya, leaving his hair in disarray. It failed to move him. Standing perfectly still in the midst of surging gales, he stared straight at the silent forest. Aside from the windy ambience of the woods, silence

surrounded him. In the absence of noise, even a leaf's flutter sounded unnaturally harsh to his ears, leaving him on edge. On occasion, a scream would echo through the trees — a sign that whatever lurked there continued to terrorize the straggling adventurers. Renya tried not to imagine what was happening to them.

The wind changed. It began to blow from the forest, bringing with it the scent of flora, along with the stink of rust and rot. Renya's nose twitched. His expression contorted in displeasure. What was supposed to be the pleasant, calming smell of trees and greenery only served to accentuate the foul odors that mingled with it.

He didn't like the smell. That was all. He just wanted to get rid of the smell. After repeating the excuse a few times, he found that he started to believe it himself. Then, he took a step forward.

Airblast.

He pumped as much mana as he could into the spell, quickcasting it at the forest. A massive gale surged forward. It met the forest wind head-on, overpowered it, and sent the pungent forest air right back into the trees. With the smell problem solved, he let out a breath.

His true motive was, of course, different. As far as he could tell, Shion never did realize that Renya could only watch a very small part of the forest. There was no way he could stop monsters from coming out of other places along the perimeter. Normally, it should have been fairly obvious, but it didn't seem to occur to her. Maybe she was too busy feeling guilty about leaving Renya by himself.

As for Rona... to be honest, Renya wasn't really sure. She could have realized and kept her mouth shut. It was also possible that she simply didn't care. Perhaps it was both. Or neither. Pondering the issue seemed fruitless, so he stopped. Anyway, the point was that he couldn't cover such a wide area by himself. Realistically, it was an impossible proposition.

In that case, how could he stop the mystery monsters from leaving the forest and heading for the city? For him, the answer was actually quite simple. It wasn't a surefire solution, but he could lure all the monsters that might come out of the forest toward him. By blowing wind into the forest, he was sending his own scent toward the monsters and telling them he was there. From what he could tell, the monsters were pretty enthusiastic about attacking humans, what with the whole chasing people and appropriating their stomachs. If it was their nature to prey on humans, once they hunted down all the adventurers in the forest, they were almost guaranteed to go after whoever was nearby. He'd just made it extremely clear that he was their next closest target. It was, in a way, a provocation.

"Well, turns out... I'm a fool too, I guess," he said mockingly.

Shion and Rona were probably making a mad dash toward town right now, trying to get back as quickly as possible. They had left behind almost all their belongings to lighten their load, taking nothing but their weapons. Figuring it would be a waste to throw so much away, he waited for them to disappear into the distance before shoving everything into his inventory. He didn't look through their belongings; there were probably things in there he wasn't supposed to see. In their mostly-unburdened state, it should take them a little over an hour to reach town. No more than two. Then, they had to go to the guild, slap the sleepy counter staff awake, and get them to report to the higher-ups. The higher-ups would then have to select some reasonably skilled members to send out as an investigation squad. The extermination squad would depart even later, following a frantic scramble to assemble enough capable fighters.

Renya had a feeling he was in for one hell of a wait.

Assuming the higher-ups in the guild weren't complete idiots, though, they would probably send out an advance party. In that case, they could probably put together the

necessary people and equipment in three or four hours. If they properly understood the urgency of the situation, they should be coming here either on horseback or by horse wagon. Once they started moving, the trip would take them about an hour. Factoring in various delays and issues, he figured that optimistically, he would be relieved from his post after standing guard for maybe eight hours. The extra time was to account for the fact that rarely if ever did anything go as people intended. There was bound to be some friction as the higher-ups tried to avoid responsibility and play the blame game. Particularly stubborn ones might not even listen to Shion and Rona's report. It was likely that even the very logistics of gathering people and equipment would face difficulties, considering it was still the middle of the night.

In fact, he wasn't even sure if there were enough adventurers left in town to begin with. They needed a good number of adventurers to form an extermination squad, and right now, a whole lot of them were busy being exterminated in the forest.

"Then again... I actually wouldn't be surprised if an extermination squad showed up pretty soon," murmured Renya at the sky.

This whole mission had seemed weird to him from the start. Why was the guild paying people to go to a forest and randomly kill monsters? Normally, an extermination mission had a very clear purpose. If goblins were having a particularly fertile year, the guild might ask people to thin out their numbers. Or maybe orcs were kidnapping too many women from a nearby village, in which case the guild might put out a mission to kill the orcs and rescue the women. Therefore, this mission made no sense. It boiled down to "Just go out and kill some stuff. We don't really care what."

It was possible that the guild's manastone stock was running low, or perhaps it was meant to help out beginners by sending them to a forest that didn't see many strong

monsters. As far as he knew, though, neither of those cases applied.

If he read between the lines, this mission actually seemed like it was using adventurers — those not sharp enough to realize how weird this mission was, anyway — as lures in a large-scale baiting operation.

It was, of course, pure conjecture on his part, and even he hadn't had the foresight to see it in advance; he was too busy looking for forest octopuses at the time. Only after the monsters showed up did the possibility occur to him.

Assuming he was correct about the mission's true purpose, investigation and extermination squads were probably already in place. Furthermore, news of this might reach the guild before Shion and Rona even got there. Bait would be meaningless, after all, if it wasn't complemented with a line and hook. That was how fishing worked.

"I don't know... It sort of feels like the fish are chewing up even the hooks in there..."

There were probably a few parties of hooks mixed in with the unwitting ones used as bait. The forest, however, was growing more and more quiet. Eventually, it fell completely silent. Despite that, he didn't see any other parties come out from the trees.

"If I'm right about this... then things are going exactly as intended for whoever came up with this plan. And that annoys me."

Renya felt a strong urge to throw a wrench into the works. Somewhere, someone was feeling rather good about themselves, and that was stirring up his mischievous side. He wanted to do something that would cause their jaw to drop to the ground. The problem was that he couldn't come up with an effective method. Had he wielded the forces of fire or ice, he could have pumped the entirety of his apparently-very-big mana pool into one massive spell that froze everything over or even turned the whole forest into ash. His aptitude was wind, though. The most he could do

with wind was probably uproot some trees. While that was certainly a sight to see, it lacked the flashiness he craved. As he gazed at the sky, an idea popped into his mind.

According to the young girl who sent him here, this world was like a miniature garden that sat on top of a big round tub. Below the tub was nothingness. What, then, was above the tub? Surely, a world like this was home to a mountain or two that were a few thousand meters high. If there were mountains, then the atmosphere should reach at least their peaks, if not higher up. Furthermore, ever since coming here, he never felt like water was boiling earlier than he was used to. In other words, the atmospheric pressure here should be close to his previous world, and the atmosphere itself should be organized in a similar fashion, with layers of increasingly thinner air at higher elevations.

“By my power, I devote thee. Fill the open air...”

Having recently purchased a secret magecraft compendium from Caryl, Renya had laid eyes on every single wind spell that was known to exist. As for the usage restrictions, after removing the one for basic level spells, he immediately used the same method as non-elemental spells to remove all the remaining restrictions as well. Currently, he was reciting the incantation for an advanced level wind spell, but with a slight modification added in. Normally, the spell was meant to suck things upward, but he visualized it in reverse, rushing downward.

He also decided to put up a barrier of wind around him; he didn't want to end up as collateral damage to his own spell. As he pictured the imminent convectional phenomenon in his mind, he simulcast a number of solid, windy walls in the shape of an expansive cocoon around him. Once the barrier was in place, he thrust his right arm up toward the sky and, as though he were trying to grasp the very heavens overhead, curled his hand firmly into a fist and continued his incantation.

“Raging tempests high above, heed my call and smash

this earth!”

The original incantation was “heed my call and pierce the sky,” but since he was reversing the direction, he adapted the words too.

Figuring he’d recover his mana soon after anyway, he withheld just enough to maintain the barrier and poured almost all of his remaining mana into the spell. When mana was infused into the circuitry of his words, the spell came to life.

In an instant, smoke enveloped everything around him. The noise was deafening. If there were a pair of eyes far, far above Renya, it might have seen that a gigantic funnel was reaching into the sky. Usually, tornadoes were natural phenomena that sucked things up from the ground and sent them flying into the air. This tornado, however, worked the other way; it sucked in everything from the surrounding air and smashed it down onto the ground. It was, in effect, not a tornado at all. The effect was probably better imagined as a whirlpool spiraling into the ocean depths, except transplanted into the sky.

The whirling cyclone, twenty kilometers high, pulled in freezing cold currents from up in the sky, eating up moisture from nearby clouds in the process, and sent it all plunging down in a thunderous torrent of wind and water. It struck the forest in front of Renya.

“Uh oh. This might be a problem...”

Everything went white. From within the barrier’s protection, Renya stared blankly as the outside world disappeared in a violent storm of ice and vapor. He could feel the deafening rumbles with his body. His plan had been to reach into very upper layers of the atmosphere and pull down what he assumed would be extremely cold air. This part of the plan worked. Unfortunately, his thought process had stopped there. He entirely failed to consider what he would do with the cold air after it came down.

A more prudent mage might have set up a number of

upward currents around the downward one, thereby creating a cycle of air that effectively restricted the spell's area of effect. Renya was not a more prudent mage, and he set up no such system. Therefore, as soon as the cold air hit the ground, it immediately began to spread. A wave of intense frost swept through the surroundings, freezing everything it touched.

For a moment, he considered canceling the spell, but eventually shrugged in a "what's done is done" manner and began to slowly move the massive funnel of wind toward the center of the forest. As the funnel drifted into the distance, the raging winds around him calmed. Nevertheless, he didn't lower the barrier.

Assuming the knowledge he carried over from his previous world was applicable, he calculated the temperature of the air he pulled down to be around -70 degrees Celsius. Even accounting for some amount of heat gain as it came down, it was almost certainly cold enough to kill an unprotected human. The only reason Renya hadn't turned into a human ice cube was because he was standing behind multiple walls of wind, which created separate layers of air. If he removed the walls, he was pretty sure he'd freeze to death instantly.

"I doubt people in this world know what a downburst is. Of course, a downburst this big and this powerful would blow plenty of minds in my previous world too..."

As the haze of vapor gradually faded, he caught a glimpse of the forest beyond the wall of white. Branches did not sway. Leaves did not rustle. The trees and grasses, and probably every animal and monster they sheltered, were frozen in place, locked into a motionless winter wonderland.

"Right, let's just say calamity struck. This was a natural disaster. Definitely a natural disaster," Renya muttered to himself. "No point telling the truth, after all. It's not like anyone will believe me."

It was probably easier to claim it was a whim of the gods,

which still sounded more convincing than “Yeah, I did that.” He looked up at the sky — at the yet-unknown deities that ruled over this world — and decided that he would shift all the blame onto them. They were the ones fighting stupid turf wars, after all. It was their fault for playing games while on the clock. In fact, he felt fully entitled to fling mud at them, since it was their negligence that resulted in him being sent on this damned cross-world journey in the first place.

“Still...”

Once he canceled the spell, the massive funnel dispersed just as quickly as it appeared. All the cold air and moisture it held spilled out in a burst of white frost. It snowed that night over the forest — big, feathery flakes drifted down from the sky, gentle and quiet. He watched as they accumulated on the ground, and murmured,

“I sure suck at magecraft...”

Using it normally, he was barely even mediocre. At full strength, he was a disaster on two legs. At this rate, his magecraft was pointless; he had no way of using it. Wondering when he would be able to remove the barrier, he surveyed his surroundings. As the full scale of the devastation he just caused sank in, he couldn’t help but let out a deep sigh.

“...Oh?”

I removed the teacup from my mouth and looked up. On the table before me lay a small purple ball. The crack that ran through it caught my eye.

“Hm? What, now, seems to have piqued your interest?” asked the bundle of bandages in front of me. It sat on a sofa across the table, and it seemed to take on the shape of a person. However, it was thick. Very thick. Its silhouette probably would have resembled a plump teddy bear of some kind. For a moment, I found myself intrigued by the sheer amount of bandages required to create that appearance.

“Well, it appears that the core I sent through the Forest Maze has been destroyed.”

The humans had yet to realize that the Forest Maze had been fully traversed by us demons. We had constructed a transfer gate between the opening to the human territories and the opening to the demon territories. With that said, only a limited amount of resources could be transported through the dungeon to build the human side’s gate, so it could only transfer one person at a time. On top of that, there was a limit to the number of times it could be used in a day and each use was prohibitively expensive, but such was the cost of doing business. Or, in this case, research.

“What were you doing there?”

“Field testing my new monsters. They’re wonderful little creatures that feed on humans, reproduce in their stomachs, and eventually fuse with their bodies.”

Before sending them on their way, I had embedded a core into one of them to control it. The fact that my control core on this end was broken meant the core-carrying monster had been destroyed as well. Barely any data had been collected. That made me annoyed. Annoyed, but not dejected. After all, doing experiments was about repetition, the goal of which was to extract necessary data from countless failures and the occasional success. It was akin to the process of trying to draw the one winning ticket from a vast lottery. A researcher who scowled at every losing ticket would have a very short career, not to mention end up with a lot of wrinkles.

“The experiment was meant to test just pure strength and reproductive speed, but...”

“It failed spectacularly, huh? I feel for you,” said the bundle of bandages lounging lazily on the sofa. It flapped its limb-like appendages around as it talked. My eye twitched. I resisted the urge to stab the utterly vexing creature, though I doubt anyone would have faulted me if I didn’t.

With that said, it was indeed a most perplexing lump of

cloth. It possessed no features on its surface that even resembled an eye or mouth. Despite that, it acted as if it saw me, and it spoke clearly with an unmuffled voice. At some point, I would have to unravel those mysterious wrappings. In fact, I might just pop it open and take a look inside for myself. Whatever I found inside, I was sure it would satisfy my curiosity. As I entertained thoughts of exploring its mysteries, I glanced at the bundle of bandages. It twitched — ostensibly a gesture of discomfort at being stared at.

“Something wrong?” I asked.

“Why, now, might I have just felt a chill... A cold, perhaps?”

“Do demons catch colds?”

“Don’t we? Well, considering how many of us are brainless machos, I doubt we’d notice even if we did.”

The bundle of bandages cackled loudly. As a demon, it was technically of a higher rank than me. As a researcher, it was also my senior. In spite of its experience and status, however, its insistence on behaving flippantly earned it the derision of its peers and the brand of an eccentric. Even I try — no, do my absolute best to not involve myself with it.

“I don’t see what’s so funny. First of all, I’m not the first one to fail an experiment there. Didn’t the experiment you just conducted in the same area also fail thanks to the intervention of a human?” I said, my voice slightly pointed.

It abruptly stopped laughing. Did it take offense at my slight? Peeking at what probably was its face revealed nothing. The bandages hid its expression. I wasn’t sure where its eyes were supposed to be, so I couldn’t even tell if it was looking at me.

“I wouldn’t say it failed,” said the bundle after a brief pause. It didn’t sound upset. “I took back what I needed. I was simply forced to terminate the experiment early.”

“I heard you also lost the manastone used for the experiment. That alone means you’ve lost a ton of money, and you still claim it’s not a failure?”

“Harsh critic, huh?”

Like a mummified teddy bear, the figure spread its two stumpy arms, flipped itself around on the sofa, and looked up at the ceiling. Every one of its gestures was so ridiculously exaggerated. It was strangely annoying. Had it been of lower, or even equal rank, I would have immediately shut it up for good. Unfortunately, it had me beat in both rank and experience. Make a brash move, and I might get myself killed.

“Either way, the experiment is stopping for a while.”

“Oh? Why, now, might that be?” asked the bundle of bandages perplexedly.

I couldn’t even begin to imagine how it was possible to ask that question. Granted, there were plenty of researchers who showed interest in literally nothing except their very specific interests, but even they should read the announcements from the higher-ups. These were not made in jest; one disobeyed them at their own mortal peril. Was the figure before me so eccentric as to ignore even that?

“Didn’t you get the notice from the military? They’re going to redesign the Forest Maze’s transfer gate so it can send a reasonably large capacity each time. Until work is done, the gate is closed.”

“Is it now? Was there a notice like that?” asked the bundle of bandages in a tone of honest surprise. It angled its head a little and began quivering. Apparently, it was trying to tilt its head in a gesture of uncertainty, but its stocky shape, made worse by all the bandages wrapped around it, was making the feat rather difficult.

I let out an exasperated breath, earnestly wishing I could stop talking to the bizarre figure in front of me and return to my research.

“There was. If you think I’m lying, go home and check for yourself.”

“Now, now, I didn’t say you were lying.”

It started flapping its appendages around again. I rolled

my eyes and decided that it was time to wrap up this conversation.

“Is that all the business you have? If so, could I ask you to leave?”

“Oh, not yet. I’ll leave when I’m done here.”

Apparently, it still wasn’t done. What else did it want? I opened my mouth to ask, but the words didn’t come. Instead, I felt a slight shock to my chest. Something warm welled up in my throat. A viscous fluid oozed out from my lips.

I looked down. I saw the familiar sight of my own chest, and the unfamiliar sight of a crude metal rod protruding from it. It occurred to me that the substance filling my throat and mouth was thick clumps of my own blood. Then, the pain came.

“Nngh... What... are you doing...”

“It’s a problem for me, you see, when you make such a scene in that area. The next time I’m there, what if I get greeted with a sword through my neck? How am I supposed to have a nice chat then?”

A closer look revealed the object in me to be a pointed metal rod with a screw thread running down its length. Its other end was jutting out from a gap between the bandages. By some mysterious principle, every time the rod rotated, it dug further into my body.

Being stabbed by a single rod, though, was far from fatal. I endured the painful discomfort of having a foreign object thrust into my body and looked for ways to escape. That was when many more rods struck me, twisting their way deep into my body. The pain was too much, and I let out a cry of agony. The bundle of bandages stood up.

“We’ll start by having you die for me. Also, as a warning to others, I have to make your death as horrifying as possible. Needless amounts of gore and all that. Just so you know. Oh, and I’ll carve out all the useful bits for later use, so don’t worry about that.”

I yelled for help. My voice never came. In its place, I felt the stifling sensation of metal in my throat. Blood bubbled out of my mouth. Unable to make a sound, I struggled in silence as the figure slowly approached me, blocking out more and more of my view.

“Now then. Shall we start with your eyes?”

In the guild hall, the figure of Fritz could be seen in his office, hunched over and holding his head. On the desk before him were mountains of documents, most of which were reports. Twenty-three parties were dead — a total of exactly 100 adventurers. That was almost every single adventurer who accepted the mission from the guild. Only one party of three people came back alive. It was, of course, the party led by Renya Kunugi.

In truth, however, Fritz couldn't care less about all that. He hadn't expected Renya's party to participate, so he had panicked a little when he first heard the news. Their eventual safe return, though, put that concern to rest.

The complete annihilation of twenty-three parties was also a trivial matter; replenishing their numbers was never a problem. From clueless nobles who had no chance to be heirs to impoverished farmers desperate for money, there were always plenty of young boys willing to become adventurers.

Veteran adventurers, of course, were not so easily replaced, but they would never have bothered with a mission like this in the first place. The way the mission was worded practically screamed “this is fishy as hell.” Had Shion been leader, it was certainly possible that she would have fallen for the trick. With Renya at the lead, though, he had thought they'd easily dodge the bait. Perhaps he had overestimated the boy.

Still, none of these was what troubled him. There were, in fact, three causes for his distress. The first was the report from the investigation squad. The new type of monster

discovered in the forest had no fixed shape. Some of them resembled beasts while others resembled humans. Some even looked like dragons. Their appearance was all over the place. All, however, had the gruesome habit of feeding on humans and using their bodies to reproduce. These conclusions had been made after the autopsy of a monster corpse brought back by the investigation squad, which were then further corroborated by the discovery of a couple more monsters in the middle of that very act. How were they discovered in the middle of the act? The answer to that led to the second problem Fritz faced.

Problem two: the forest in question had basically been wiped off the map. According to Renya, the sole eyewitness, he had seen some white string-like things fall from the sky and thrust themselves into the forest. Sensing danger, he'd barely managed to put up a barrier before everything went white. The next thing he knew, the world seemed to have frozen over. Fritz had tried to verify the claim through gracecraft, but gave up after Renya adamantly demanded to be paid for it.

After all, truth or not, it was an undeniable fact that a vast expanse of forest had turned to ice. The investigation squad claimed that about seventy to eighty percent of the forest was frozen, and most of the trees had been flattened. The place would never look the same again. According to mages who accompanied the investigation squad, in order for humans to attempt the same feat, they would need to grab a couple hundred mages and run them dry of mana. Only then might the spell they produce be destructive enough to rival the damage they saw. As a result, the incident report included the line, "Due to the aforementioned reasons, this incident is believed to be a sudden natural disaster brought on by the will of the gods."

If that was true, Fritz had a mind to curse the gods that did this. Adventurer casualties aside, the loss of the forest meant a loss of natural resources. The townspeople would

suffer. Disaster relief was the Crown's responsibility, so there would be no direct penalty to Fritz, but they were definitely going to demand his aid in implementing whatever plan they came up with. More work for him was guaranteed.

As for the third problem, she was currently standing right in front of him.

"Well, Fritz? I assume you have a very good explanation for this, so let's hear it," said Rona in a perfectly placid voice. Her smile chilled him to the bone. He could almost see an aura of dark flames enveloping her. Clothed in a priest robe, her shapely figure was pleasantly familiar. The mace, however, was not. She held it in her right hand, which trembled slightly from its white-knuckled grip. There was a silent pressure emanating from her. Fritz shifted uncomfortably on the spot.

"Okay, it's true that the guild acted alone in this incident. But I thought for sure that man wouldn't fall for it..."

"Shall I consider those to be your last words, Fritz?"

"Huh? No, I... What?"

"Allow me to send you on your way then. Be glad that I'll do it with only one hit. You won't suffer."

"Wait, what? Huh?!"

The deathly scream of a man echoed throughout the guild hall. The staff members spared a quick glance at each other before returning to their duties as if nothing ever happened.

## **Interlude: The Second One, or So It Was Told**

The day of a silkie began early in the morning.

Frau's eyes opened before sunrise. She sat up on her bed and rubbed sleepily at her eyes. After a few blinks, she looked at her surroundings. Though a tad drab, it was the same familiar room she was used to seeing — Renya's room. She had asked to have a smaller bed placed beside Renya's, and that was where she currently slept. At first, the idea had met with fierce resistance from Shion and Rona, who fussed about whether fairies even needed sleep and the appropriateness of sleeping in Renya's room.

In the end, Frau had shut them up with a smile and a rather meaningful "Hush now." To be fair, in making her point, she had also employed every single object in the house by infusing them with her mana. The effect was superb, judging from how pale their faces went. Her one regret was that Renya had been caught in the wake. She ruefully recalled the way he looked at her afterwards, eyes wide with alarm.

She hopped down from the bed. By the time her feet touched the ground, she was already wearing her usual maid uniform. It was unpleasant to sleep in, so she wore a solid white nightgown to bed. When it was time to change back, the switch was instantaneous. She was, after all, originally a fairy who specialized in tailoring.

It took some convincing, but she had also managed to talk Renya into putting up a full-length mirror on the wall. She used it to check her own appearance. Once she confirmed that everything looked fine, she softly

approached the sleeping Renya.

Regarding Renya, Frau had come to a certain conclusion: once he fell asleep, it was no simple matter to wake him again. This was supported by the results of a variety of tests she had conducted. There was one caveat, though. If one approached him with the intent to cause harm, he noticed immediately. Renya was extremely sensitive to malice, and even the slightest hint of something threatening could cause him to leap off the bed in the middle of the night. As his roommate, Frau had to pay extra attention to this particularity. She had already overstepped in requesting to share his room. It would not do if her own actions disturbed her master's sleep.

So long as she was mindful of this fact, though, the rest was smooth sailing; Renya was insensitive to almost everything else. Loud noises didn't wake him. Shaking him didn't work either. She had heard that when they set up camp outside, he could even sleep through Shion wrapping herself around him.

Frau took that to mean that hugging was a-okay. Therefore, the first thing she did every morning was dive into Renya's bed. Despite what she thought was a pretty significant jostle, this had never woken him up. She lifted up one side of the blanket, slipped in, and pulled herself up against Renya's arm. For the next little while, she would simply bask in pure bliss.





It would be a good ten minutes before she felt satisfied. After fully savoring the sensation, she crawled out of Renya's bed, made a half-hearted attempt to straighten out her clothes, and left the room.

The first thing Frau had to do was go to all the non-occupied rooms in the house and open all the curtains. This allowed the light outside to enter, functioning as a signal for all those things that lurked in dark crevices and shadowy corners of the house. It told them that their job was done, at which point they would wearily retreat back into the basement after a good night's work.

Frau had instructed them not to be seen by the house's residents. To drive the point home, she appended a clause: she would see to it that those who were seen would face swift and absolute annihilation. Normally, fairies couldn't do things like that. Frau wasn't sure why she could. She vaguely figured it probably had something to do with the fact that she had been gobbling up half-materialized evil spirits and the like before Renya showed up. Maybe that had altered her nature as a fairy. It didn't bother her, though. Whatever the reason, if it allowed her to be of use to Renya, Shion, and Rona, then it was fine.

Next, she went to the kitchen to prepare breakfast. Renya took turns with her making lunch and dinner, but she usually handled all the breakfasts. Today's menu consisted of soft, fluffy bread and crisp, crunchy bacon with a side of fried eggs. The bread was made in-house, using a method that involved yeast she had learned from Renya. Bread normally sold in bakeries was stiff and not to Renya's liking.

She then took leafy greens, dried and resoaked in water, and mixed them with thin slices of forest octopus arms to make a salad. Then, she took a sour dressing of primarily vinegar and added it to a mashed paste made by steaming a round vegetable Renya called "the potato-y thing." Finally, there was the usual meat and vegetable stew, seasoned with salt and well-boiled. To this, she added milk, making a thick,

creamy soup that rounded off their breakfast. Recipes were all courtesy of Renya.

At times, she had tried asking Shion and Rona for recipes, only to be shown a most uninspired collection of either roasted or boiled items. Seasoning was binary: either salt or sugar. Frau soon decided that she'd rather not use the recipes from the girls.

Once breakfast was ready, her next job was to wake up the residents. Renya was easy. She only needed to glance at him a little threateningly to make him fly hysterically out of bed.

"Hey, uh... Can we talk about how you wake me up every day? This isn't good for my nerves..."

"Frau is really sorry, but this is the easiest way. It works like a charm every time," she said with a quick bow, leaving Renya with no choice but to scratch his head in concession.

Once she told Renya that breakfast was ready, she produced a small piece of ice in her hand and moved to Shion's room. After opening the door, she walked over to Shion's bed, where she lay sleeping. The usual knot at the back of her head was gone, and her lustrous black hair spread freely across the bed. The knot must have gotten in the way when she slept.

Shion did not rise easily. Frau pulled down Shion's blanket a little, revealing the nightwear around her chest. She slipped the piece of ice right into the cleft and left the room without a second glance. Behind her, the screaming began. She paid no attention; it was a daily occurrence.

One room remained. Frau found that she wasn't very fond of dealing with the voluptuous beauty inside. She entered to find Rona sprawled carelessly on the bed wearing a translucent nightgown. Her blanket was entirely displaced. The temperature in the house was usually controlled through magecraft, so it was never so cold that a blanket was necessary for slumber. Frau was in charge of keeping each room comfortable, but there were times when she felt a

strong urge to drop the temperature a few dozen degrees in this room.

Rona's extravagant proportions might give off the impression that she was a tad plump, but that would be untrue. She was better described as "full." There was a certain part of her body that was fuller than most others, and every time Frau saw them, she secretly uttered a curse for them to get ripped off. Once, she cursed a little too seriously and one of things in the basement actually showed up to carry out her command. Ever since then, she had tempered the strength of her cursing. She still cursed, though. Who could look at those and not?

"Miss Rona, rise and shine!"

Compared to the other two, Rona was a good riser. She woke up as soon as Frau spoke. That was one thing Frau appreciated.

"Mmm... Haa..."

Rona yawned as she opened her eyes. It was needlessly seductive. More secret cursing ensued as Frau maintained a perfectly charming smile. Words such as "fall off" and "sag" never left her lips.

"Miss Rona, it's morning."

"Mmm... Good morning, Frau. I'm getting some chills... Did you lower the temperature?"

"Nn-nn, it's the same as always. Miss Rona is just wearing too little."

*Make them fall off? Make them sag?* asked the basement things. She would if she could, but she had to say no. Renya would chop her to bits.

"Breakfast is ready."

"Thanks. I'll be there soon," answered Rona before she murmured something about "chills" and "weird." Frau left her alone with her thoughts and moved on to the next task.

Laundry was done in the bathroom. All of the residents' clothes needed to be washed. For Frau, though, this was a trivial matter. By using the Control spell, the process was

nearly automatic. The process of doing laundry for her was more or less subconscious, so she could go clean up the kitchen in the meantime. By the time she returned all the dishes to the cupboard, all the clothes had already found their place on the racks in the garden, hanging beside a number of blankets and mattress covers that Frau had stripped away from the beds.

Renya and the girls were rarely home during the day. They were usually doing guild missions, involving such trifling matters as collecting raw materials and hunting weak monsters. Their period of absence, however, was also when Frau got down to business. This was her serious time.

First up, tending to the garden. Unbeknownst to Renya and the girls, the grass and trees growing in the garden were not normal. Frau had been supplying them with mana and nutrients. The mana came from Renya. As for the nutrients... Well, as Frau liked to put it, the source of the nutrients was "hush-hush." The result was that while the plants looked normal, they were actually more monster than flora. When she came across grass that had grown too long, she politely apologized before plucking them out. Once they were dried and carefully flattened, she could extract thin strands of tough fiber from the long, slender leaves of the grass. She had no idea why, but by weaving various fibers together, she could produce a thread many times more durable than its parts.

On one side of the garden, a certain type of plant seemed to flourish. The numerous stems, however, were actually connected underground, meaning that it was all one organism. The tips of this plant's stems contained a deadly toxin.

Above ground, its leaves were home to spiders, jet black in color, that quietly weaved their web-like nests. These used to be regular spiders that lived in the garden, but now, they were better categorized as monsters. Being the size of a human thumb, they were somewhat larger than regular

ones of their breed, so they also received Frau's stern warning to not show up when Shion or Rona were around.

The silk they produced was the same color as their body. Though thin and supple, the black thread was nonetheless remarkably tough. Frau knew the spiders to sometimes go to places hidden from the eyes of the residents, where they hunted small birds and animals. When a dozen of them got together, the webs they spun could catch even humans. Once their prey was captured, they injected a strong solvent into its body, dissolving its innards so they could suck them up. Soon, the victim would be reduced to nothing but skin and bones — literally. When this happened, Frau would have to clean up after them. Faced with a pile of remains, she would have no choice but to dry them, crush them up, and bury them in the garden.

As a matter of fact, the clothes Renya currently wore were made with the silk from the spiders and the fibers of the grasses. Both were extremely difficult to procure and handle, so mass production was out of the question. At the very least, though, Frau intended to make sets for Shion and Rona at some point.

There were also many other trees and plants growing in the garden, but even Frau couldn't keep tabs on which ones were what kind of monster. It wouldn't be worth it anyway; every time she looked away, some of them would morph into different ones. An accurate record was an impossible task. She committed to memory only the ones she frequently used, figuring she could examine the rest whenever the need arose.

Once the garden had been taken care of, it was break time. Frau had no need to eat, so when the house was vacated, she didn't need to cook. Instead, she lowered herself onto her favorite resting spot — Renya's bed — for a short break.

The garden wasn't that big, but for some reason, there were frequently people strewn across the ground. In order to

keep them from being seen by Renya and the girls, she hid the bodies deep within thick growths of plants. They had probably been immobilized by some sort of toxin and passed — whether out or away, she didn't care to check. Left there, they would eventually be pulled into the earth by the roots around them. At times, though, it was necessary for her to take a couple of live ones and throw them into the basement. What awaited her poor victims down there was a very cold and terrible end. The basement things loved the warmth of the living. Specifically, they loved sucking it out.

Frau didn't exactly need the constant supply of fresh bodies, but she certainly appreciated it. She had no idea who kept sending them over, and she didn't care enough to find out. They had her gratitude, though.

"Frau should thank them some time."

Being a fairy who knew her manners, Frau would very much like to say thanks in person, but she simply had no way of figuring out who to thank. The thought elicited a sigh from her as she prepared the ingredients for the next meal in the quiet afternoon kitchen.

There was much to prepare. Various soups were needed for flavor, yeast was required to make bread, vegetables had to be ground to a paste, and dressings needed to be mixed. These, and most of her repertoire of techniques, were all taught by Renya. While she worked, she cast Control to bring the laundry in. They were then folded, and the nightwear was neatly placed on the beds, taking care to avoid wrinkles.

Then, she began cooking dinner and readying the bath. Dinner today was ground meat with a dab of spice, cheese-coated pasta, and a salad of leafy vegetables with boiled eggs and chicken. The finishing touch was a fruit bowl and some wine. The wine was cheap, but it did its job.

Once she finished cleaning up after dinner, her day's work was mostly done. There remained a few more duties such as cleaning the bathroom and readying the ingredients

for breakfast tomorrow, but there was no rush. As long as she got those done before going to bed, it would be fine.

For some reason, Rona was the first to sleep. Shion was next, followed by Renya. Frau was fairly sure there was some reason for Renya turning in last. She never asked, though, because she was also fairly sure the reason would turn out to be something very stupid that Renya deemed extremely important.

Only after the three residents were sound asleep did Frau crawl into bed. When she did, it was the cue for those shapeless and soundless forms to emerge from the basement. Through the rest of the night, countless shadows would roam the house in silence, guarding it from intruders. Their work would continue until the next morning when she opened the curtains again.

*What should Frau make for breakfast tomorrow?* That one last thought occupied her mind as she closed her eyes.

So did the day of a silkie come to a close.

## **Chapter 5: They Were Going to the Elf Kingdom, or So It Was Told**

“I want to go check out the elf kingdom.”

The residents of Renya’s household had been enjoying a nice cup of Frau’s tea in the guest room when he made that announcement out of the blue. Everyone stared at him.

People here commonly drank a type of tea known as dark tea, which produced a black liquid that smelled just as bad as it tasted. Frau, instead, had served them something of much higher quality — black tea. In fact, black tea was considered the very best of teas. It was trailed by the green and yellow teas, which were of medium quality. Renya thought that green tea tasted more than good enough, but it was Frau’s personal policy to use only the best that she could find, so she stubbornly continued to serve them black tea. There was one time when Renya had muttered under his breath something along the lines of “if we had spare cash lying around, I’d rather use it to pay off the loan,” to which Frau simply shrugged before declaring that regular repayments had already begun.

Apparently, Renya Manastone Industries (CEO: Frau) had been on a roll lately thanks to his mana allowing them to constantly produce manastones, the sales of which were providing them with a steady source of income. Buying a property on a loan and then having that property pay its loan back seemed like a rather unusual situation that Renya wasn’t sure if he was okay with. Frau, however, pointed out that since their income relied on resources that ultimately

came from Renya's mana, it could be said that they were his indirect earnings. There was nothing wrong with him working to pay off his own loan.

Back in the guest room, Renya's abrupt comment almost caused Shion to spew out a mouthful of black tea. She managed to set her cup down on the table and, after confirming that all liquids would remain in their appropriate orifices, stared at him.

"Pretty sudden, huh?"

"I'll admit it's sudden, but I mean... Now that we can actually go, don't you want to take a look? I've never seen an elf before."

"In terms of creatures that are interesting to look at, I would put them pretty close to the bottom of the list..." murmured Rona as she brought her cup to her mouth with both hands.

"Are they really that boring?"

"Yes. First of all, you would be lucky to catch a glimpse of them behind their egos." Rona lowered her cup and began rattling off descriptions, putting up a finger for each one.

"They have pretty faces, but in a weird, unearthly way, and you can't tell what gender they are. Their body shapes are similarly vague. In other words, the males are small, and the females are flat. Or so I have heard."

"Whoa, whoa! What do you mean, 'small' and 'flat'?"

"You know exactly what I mean. But, well, I haven't seen them for myself, so I suppose I can't say for certain. Their long lifespans give them plenty of time to work with, which might explain why many of them have laid-back personalities. Conversely, they're also extremely fussy, and if you rub one of them the wrong way, they can hold a grudge for years. Such a pain. Also, they love nature, so they have little interest in arts and crafts, and they build their structures around trees and branches that already exist."

"Issues of subjectivity aside... you sure know a lot, don't you?"

“Why, thank you. Flattery will get you everywhere with me, you know?” Rona grinned, much to chagrin of Shion, who fixed her with a glare. The look in her glowering friend’s eyes seemed to say, “Even I know that much.”

“But what made you want to go to the elf kingdom so suddenly?”

“I’m sick and tired of the guild watching over me. They’ve been breathing down my neck ever since that incident.”

After the death of over two dozen parties in a forest near the city, Renya had a creeping feeling that the guild had been keeping a much closer eye on him. He had always known that suspicious figures would wander around the vicinity of his house from time to time, but recently, he felt like he had been spotting them with increasing frequency. Fortunately, none of them had gone so far as to step inside the house. That fact offered him some relief. It was then that, out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Frau gazing intently at him.

“What’s the matter?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. But, if everyone goes to the elf kingdom, will Frau be home alone?”

The fairy’s sad expression gave him pause. While she could go outside by bonding herself to him, he had no idea if she could get through the transfer gate.

“I mean, if you can go through the gate, then I’ll take you along,” he said, making a mental note to ask Azu about it later.

“If you’re going, then we’ll go with you. We’re paying for our own usage fees, though, right?” asked Shion.

Renya nodded before adding, “If Frau lets us use the manastones she made, though, I suspect we’ll be able to go for much cheaper. There’s also that discount that Azu promised to get us.”

“That’s true, but... are we just going for sightseeing?” asked Rona with a perplexed frown.

The concept of “travel” as Renya understood it —

excursions that cost a significant amount of money per trip — was not commonplace in this world. Nobles or wealthy business owners were the only kinds of people who might do so on occasion. While merchants certainly went from place to place to sell their wares, the vast majority of townsfolk went from womb to grave in the same city. This did not apply to adventurers, of course, but neither were they townsfolk.

“Is there something wrong with sightseeing?”

“Well, I suppose there’s nothing *wrong* with it, but...”

Rona’s frown lingered, but Renya was determined to see this through. Traveling for work was not traveling, and he had had enough of the former. He was in the mood for some sightseeing. And some hot springs, to be honest. He wondered if the elf kingdom had hot springs.

“All right. Now that’s decided, let me go find Azu. I’ll ask him about how to use the gate and book a trip along the way.”

“Shion and I will start packing then. We’ll start with the weapons.”

“Huh? We are?” asked Shion, her expression profoundly blank. “Why do we need weapons to go sightseeing?”

Two fist-shaped hammers slammed down onto her head. If only they could knock the stupid out of her.

“Each transfer can handle a maximum weight of 150 kilograms. You can send two people together if you want, so long as you’re under the limit. I promised I’d get you a discount on the price, so here it is. Assuming you’re bringing your own manastones, you’ll only be paying the usage fee, which comes to one silver per head. If you’re going to the elf kingdom, they need to be informed of your arrival. Also, the gate destination needs to be adjusted. All in all, it’ll probably take two days. Any questions?”

Upon being asked about the transfer gate, Azu’s response was swift and concise. They were in a teacher’s office, and the mage had his elbows on his desk. His fingers were

folded.

Renya grunted. Azu's answer was certainly right on the dot. Almost... too on the dot. Renya squinted at the mage, trying to figure out how he went about reading people's minds.

"What?" Azu raised an eyebrow.

"Why'd you assume we're bringing our own manastones?"

"The one over there..." said Azu as he pointed at the short figure beside Renya. "Frau, was it?"

Renya had brought the fairy with him while Shion and Rona stayed home to do the packing.

"The market has seen a large influx of manastones," Azu continued, "and they all came from a fairy. It hasn't caused the price to plummet yet, but even the school is starting to pay attention. Just so you know, people are asking questions. About where all these manastones are coming from."

"Tch... Nosy bastards."

"Tha— Huh? Uhh, Frau? Excuse me?"

"Frau said nothing. Also, Frau is a good girl and talks with the merchants about it, so everything is a-okay."

Renya felt like he'd just heard something terribly unnerving, but a glance at Frau revealed nothing but her beaming smile. Had it been Shion or Rona, their eyes probably would have darted away, but Frau looked at him straight on. This fairy had some nerve. It was actually kind of impressive.

Frau had actually asked Rona and Azu to introduce her to a few merchants, possibly because she wanted to set up some kind of shop in the house using the old storefront space. Those merchants served as an entry point for her, allowing her to move her manastones into market. The details of her operations, however, were a mystery to Renya.

"Frau knows to keep things nice and modest. Too many eyes is a big no-no, so Frau has been selling at a slow trickle to avoid attention... But the school moved a little bit faster

than Frau thought..." said the fairy as she ground her teeth.

"What's the problem? It's not like you've got anything to hide, right?" asked Azu nonchalantly.

"Frau has nothing to hide. But they were too fast in sniffing out Frau as the source."

"Well, it's not like the school just sits there and twiddles its thumbs all day. They've got ways of gathering information."

With many children of the nobility under their care, the school was hungry for all relevant information regarding local occurrences, seeking to keep themselves constantly informed. A simple "we didn't know" would hardly do if anything befell their precious charges. Frau's operation had apparently brushed against a strand of their high-strung intelligence network.

"Hey, uh, to be honest, I really couldn't care less about any of that..." said Renya as he hesitantly butted in, feeling distinctly like he was being left out of the conversation. Suddenly, Frau and Azu seemed to be speaking an entirely different language. As terms such as "gathering information" and "intelligence network" got thrown back and forth, Renya felt his eyes beginning to spin.

"How many manastones will we need?"

"It takes about a gold's worth of manastones to activate it, and each activation can handle two transfers."

"So, let's say Frau and I go together... Then Shion and Rona, and the luggage is maybe two more times? Five transfers in total means three activations. Do we have enough manastones for that, Frau?"

The weight limit of 150 kilograms per transfer was barely enough for one adult plus gear. There was no way they could fit in a second adult. Frau, however, was light enough to tag along with Renya, so the two of them could make the leap together. Regardless, they still needed three gold's worth of manastones, which was about as much as Renya had amassed from the goblins back at the settlers' village. It

seemed a dizzying quantity to produce on short notice, but Frau put his worries to rest with an easy nod.

"It's a piece of cake. Frau can have them ready right away."

"Damn. Impressive."

"All thanks to Master."

All this time, Renya had been supplying Frau with a near-constant flow of mana. A particularly serious event might interrupt it, but those were few and far between. While Frau compressed the mana for storage, there was always a limit to how much she could hold. This issue was cleared when she gained the ability to crystallize mana, effectively ensuring her mana would never overflow. Nevertheless, Renya's ever-growing mana pool necessarily resulted in more mana being fed to Frau with each passing day.

"I wonder how much mana I actually have right now."

The first time he had it properly tested, he was told it was hopelessly small. The second time, Caryl called him a monster. He hadn't measured it carefully yet, but judging from his ability to cast large-scale spells and keep multiple spells active for extended durations, he figured the pool was getting pretty big.

"Probably enough for that mana-measuring orb to let out a blinding flash before exploding and taking the whole city with it."

"Ha ha. Of course," said Renya, playing along with the joke. "No, but seriously..."

He trailed off when he saw Azu's face.

"Wait... are you being serious?"

"As serious as I can be." Azu nodded soberly.

Renya gave a hesitant smile.

"You know I'm only human, right?"

"I sure do. Which only makes it harder to explain the massive increase in your mana capacity in such a short time," replied Azu. "Generally, they don't grow much to begin with."

Renya fell silent for a minute, pondering his response.

"What say we go with the fruits of hard work?"

"If hard work could go that far, then how much have I been slacking off?" said Azu mockingly before shifting his tone. "Anyway, none of that matters. You can't explain talent. It is what it is."

"Master is just that good," said Frau with a pleased *hmph*. Both Renya and Azu wore smiles as they watched the fairy proudly puff out her chest as if she were the one being praised. The former was tinged with embarrassment, while the latter had the gentleness of an amused parent.

"That's right, Frau. Your master is awesome."

"Quit that, damn it! What're you trying to do? Praise me to death?"

"Not at all. I'm just expressing my boundless reverence for Mr. Renya, teacher of the year."

"Oh, I get it. This is about that, right? Lealis gave you a good talking-to and now you're getting back at me," said Renya with a glare.

Azu shrugged it off, putting up his hands up in a "I have not the slightest idea what you're talking about" manner.

Beyond the transfer gate was supposedly a long tunnel, past which lay the elf kingdom. Frau held Renya's hand as they walked toward it. When they reached the end, the first thing Frau said was,

"Master, what's that?"

With a curious look, she turned toward Renya, who found himself at a loss for words. The first answer that came to mind was "somebody ripped off the work of an author from my previous world," but that hardly seemed like a reasonable response. He mulled over it for a while.

"That... is telling us we're here."

He went with the safe answer in the end.

Two days after putting in the request with Azu, Renya and the girls had been told that the gate was ready for use. With

their luggage already packed, the four of them simply stuffed everything into his inventory and headed off, arriving at the school practically empty-handed. Upon meeting up with Azu, he showed them to the room with the transfer gate.

As a matter of fact, it wasn't until very recently that they realized it was possible to use one less transfer by storing the luggage in Renya's inventory. They were fortunate for it to have occurred to them right in the nick of time; saving one activation of the gate was no small matter.

The room itself proved to be rather boring. On one wall, there was a door just about tall enough for an adult to pass through while standing up. There was little else. A hole was beside the door, and Azu haphazardly tossed a bunch of manastones into it. The door in the wall then opened, revealing the empty space beyond. It was pitch black inside.

"All right. In you go," said Azu as he pointed a finger at the blackness in a profoundly indifferent manner. Renya stared at him.

"Okay, hold on a damn minute. Is it just me or is that a terrifying door to walk through?"

"What are you scared of? It's just a hole in the wall."

"Are you kidding me?! It's blacker than death in there! Are you sure it's okay to go in?!"

"If it wasn't okay to go in there, it wouldn't work very well as a gate, would it?" said Azu in a patronizing tone.

Regardless, Renya found himself extremely unwilling to step into a murky darkness where he couldn't see anything. Something about it made him feel a very primal sense of dread. Were this the darkness of night, he could feel things out; there were ways to tell what was going around him, albeit to a limited degree. The darkness beyond the door, though, was different. He couldn't feel anything past here.

"Master." Frau pulled on his sleeve. "Frau will go first. Master can hold Frau's hand and follow behind."

"You hear that, Renya? Even the little one's fine with it.

Meanwhile, look at you...”

“Maybe the two of us should go first, then?”

Frau had offered to lead the way. Azu’s lips twisted upward into a mocking grin. Even Rona proposed going in first after seeing Renya’s hesitation. The pressure was reaching critical levels. Renya took a deep breath.

“No, it’s okay. I’ll go,” he said, taking a step forward.

“Master, Frau goes with Master too,” said the fairy, her voice still slightly concerned. A small hand wrapped itself around his, insisting on braving the darkness with him.

As it turned out, there was no long tunnel. As soon as Renya walked through the gate, the darkness faded away, revealing the wooden walls of a room. They had stepped through a door in the wall. There was a hole to the side for inserting manastones. The room was almost identical to the one they came from, right down to its boring design.

Before them stood the source of Frau’s curiosity.

An elf regarded them, her bright turquoise eyes ending in long slits at the sides. Her golden hair reached down to her waist. Two ears, long and thin, were at either side of her head — an overt reminder of her race. Her delicate features and slender face were undeniably attractive. She wore a leather chest guard atop an undershirt, both grassy green. Her boots were likewise, and only her skirt stood out in black. To a learned observer, it would have been an exemplary display of elven fashion, but the nuances were completely lost on Renya, who simply looked on with the wide-eyed wonder of a clueless tourist.





"Is she the greeting elf?" asked Frau, her hand still clasped in his. Upon hearing the question, the elf bent a little at the waist and lowered her head.

"I belong to the Adventurers School. My name is Croire. I have been assigned to be your guide here."

"Our guide?"

Renya raised an eyebrow. He didn't remember asking for a guide. Behind him, Rona appeared out of the gate with Shion following soon after.

"Correct. It would be a problem if humans were allowed to roam around unattended."

"You're telling me we have to follow you everywhere?"

"Should you wish to avoid unnecessary trouble, I recommend doing so," said the elf named Croire, never once attempting to make eye contact. There was a tone of finality in her voice.

Though her mannerisms appeared polite, there was an arrogance to her words that rubbed Renya the wrong way, causing his brows to furrow. The look on Frau's face suggested some displeasure as well. Shion, having completely failed to grasp the situation, regarded the proceedings blankly.

Rona simply declared war.

"Roam around unattended? Hah. As if this shabby little hut had anywhere for us to roam. And don't worry about the rest of your city. We won't gawk — we've seen plenty of forests already."

"...Oh dear. What is that creature? It appears to be blobs of fat on legs. It can even speak our language. How curious. Is it a pet or something?"

It felt like the room's temperature suddenly dropped below freezing. Renya quickly excused himself from the intersection of their gazes.

"Language? No sane person would call this a language. Whoever came up with it clearly doesn't know what practicality means."

"I commend you then, for displaying such proficiency with it. You're a smart creature, aren't you? Are you a new species of some sort?"

"Hey, um... Renya?" whispered Shion.

He felt a second hand on him. With Frau clinging onto his sleeve, Shion pulled at his shoulder.

"What? Can't you see how tense things are? Don't say anything stupid."

"Um, well... I can sort of tell too, but what exactly are the two of them saying?"

"Huh? What do you even mean by that? They just said—"

He stopped when he noticed that the fairy clinging onto his sleeve looked perplexed as well. The fact that both of them were confused presented a certain possibility.

"Wait... are those two speaking Elvish?"

"I don't know if it's Elvish, but I have no idea what Rona's saying. Do you, Renya?"

He did. And he also realized that he hadn't the slightest idea why. After some thought, he concluded that it was probably due to the skills the girl had given him, one of which was "Foreign World Language." This was, he decided, quite possibly a blessing and a curse all in one. Evidently, he understood the languages of both humans and elves, but he made no mental distinction between them. Moreover, this skill would likely function the same way when he spoke as well. In other words, it was quite possible that every single race in this world could understand what he said. Therefore, a feat such as speaking in a different language to avoid being overheard was physically impossible for him. He rubbed his temples, feeling frustrated by how impractical the skill was.

Meanwhile, the conversation between Rona and Croire grew ever more heated.

"I was informed of a visit by humans, not a creature made of fat blobs."

"It's okay. I don't expect you to be able to tell the

difference. After all, you elves are so flat you can barely tell your own genders apart.”

“Oh dear. It seems like the creature has rather poor vision. Or perhaps too small a brain, considering it’s too stupid to know the difference between males and females.”

“Says the race that takes 200 years to reach adulthood. I wouldn’t talk about brain sizes if I were you.”

“Okay, so I’m glad you two get along so well, but...” said Renya as he waded into the verbal battle. Left alone, these two might keep hurling insults at each other until sundown. His next words, however, got stuck in his throat when two pairs of murderous eyes glared at him.

“Ahem. I believe you referred to yourself as Renya? I recognize that you are human, but I’m dismayed to hear your awful suggestion that I get along with this despicable creature of fat. I had heard from Azu that for a human, you’re on the decent side. I ask that you don’t disappoint me.”

“I’m sorry, Renya, but is there something wrong with you? Are you suggesting that I’m friends with this scrawny twig of an elf?”

They went back to glaring at each other.

“Okay, Rona, come here for a minute,” Renya said, grabbing Rona’s shoulder and pulling her away from the staring contest. He turned away from the elf and, ignoring the pointed gaze he felt on his back, asked Rona in a low voice. “So? What’s the deal? How come you’re picking fights right out the door?”

“...Well, as you can see, elves are naturally a slender race,” mumbled Rona. There was a hint of embarrassment to her hushed voice. “Therefore, humans who are... fuller in proportions are seen by them as being too fat. Or at least having too much meat on their bones.”

“So?”

“This isn’t my first time in the elf kingdom. I’ve been here on a short trip for work before...”

According to her, she had been accompanying some Triden dignitary in her role as a knight at the time. Female knights were a rare sight for elves, and when they arrived here, she was forced to endure a long shower of gazes. With the gazes, of course, also came plenty of comments, the most polite of which referred to her as fleshy. The rest were various obscenities appended to the word “fat.” As she was part of a diplomat’s retinue, no one mocked her to her face, but the hushed murmurs — kept just loud enough for her to hear — and private smirks left her with more than a little hate for the elves.

“I guess that’s also why you can speak their language?”

“I’d rather not, but being the egoists they are, the elves refuse to use the common language.”

She then mentioned that the majority of elves honestly believe their language to be the most beautiful and brilliant one in the world.

“Personally,” she continued after making a disgusted face, “I don’t like it. It has multiple words that mean the same thing, and there are far too many modifiers and they’re all too long. I think it’s an extremely impractical language.”

“Okay, sure. Some of that was a bit irrelevant, but I get where you’re coming from.”

Renya patted Rona on the shoulder and instructed her to stand by with Shion. Then, he turned to Croire. At a glance, with her delicate figure and short stature, she would have passed for a middle school student. Her age and experience, however, seemed to exude from her in an aura that no middle school student could ever hope to match.

“My companion caused some trouble. I apologize for that,” Renya said as he lowered his head.

First, the apology. When first impressions were still being made, it was not appropriate to let any antagonism show, regardless of what one thought on the inside.

“I apologize as well. It appears that I let my emotions get the better of me.”

When Renya looked back up, he was surprised to find Croire lowering her head as well. All the talk about elves being arrogant egoists had made him expect a snide remark or two in return.

"You looked surprised. Though, I suppose I can't fault you."

"Oh, uh, sorry. It's just that I'd heard you're a proud people, so I was caught off guard a little... Is there a reason for it?" he asked curiously.

The elf regarded him intently. After a while, she beckoned him with her hand and led him away from the others. Once they were standing in the corner of the room, she spoke again.

"What I'm about to tell you is a secret. Do you understand?"

"...Sure. I won't say a word to anyone else."

Seeing that he nodded, Croire leaned toward him and whispered into his ear.

"The truth is, the elf kingdom has seen a certain trend in recent years. Some elves have been trying to change the ideals of beauty. You could call it a reformation movement of sorts..."

"Hm?"

"They're proposing that women more endowed in flesh, such as your companion there, embody a form of beauty in their own right. They've even suggested that the sexual potency of such women may eclipse those of normal elves, making them superior..."

"Hmmm?"

Renya frowned. The conversation seemed to be heading in a strange direction.

"So, what you're saying is..."

"...If I'm to be honest, I'd say that this might be what one would call 'jealousy.'"

Renya looked at Croire. He would have thought the elf was sulking, had it not been for the faint color in her cheeks.

His mouth opened, but no words came. He closed it and blinked a few times. All he could do was stare at her.

It was said that elves usually built their cities in forests, and the town Renya's group found themselves in after stepping out of the transfer gate was no exception. Elves were also referred to as forestfolk, and true to that name, they shared a common desire to live in the woods, preferring the company of trees to rocks or sand. As a result, elven architecture often employed living trees as pillars in their construction. Some structures were such a peculiar sight that Renya simply had no idea how they were even built.

As it turned out, the place where Renya's group had stepped out of the transfer gate was actually a room in the Adventurers School of the elven city of Gran Kain. Their guide, Croire, happened to be a student of the school.

"Why did they send a student?" he asked as the elf led them out of the room.

First of all, he didn't think they needed a guide, and even if one was to be arranged, a school would surely assign a teacher. Which school would send one of its students on a job like this? As they walked toward the outside of the school, Croire turned her head back toward them and gave a simple answer.

"Because she's exceptional, probably?" She went through the motion of proudly puffing out her chest. It was only the motion. One could not, after all, puff out what was not there.

"They must have made a mistake, then, putting such top-level talent on a job like this, don't you think?"

"The task is to prevent trouble before it occurs. Mediocrity will not suffice."

Renya had meant for his comment to be a tad slighting, hoping to provoke a response from Croire. Her cool and unaffected response, however, told him that his attempt was unsuccessful. It made him reconsider things. While he had seen his fair share of things — over ninety-four years' worth

with both lifetimes combined — it was possible that the elf before him dwarfed him in sheer number of years lived. If so, it would make Croire the first person he met since coming to this world who was actually older than him.

“Elves live pretty long, right?”

“Disregarding the abrupt change in topic, yes, we do.”

“How old are you? I can’t tell at all just by looking.”

“I will be seventy this year.”

“...Seventy?”

He was still the oldest.

Recalling that Rona had mentioned something about elves reaching adulthood at two hundred years old, he gauged their lifespan to be approximately ten times that of humans. Based on Croire’s appearance, he had figured that even if she wasn’t 200, she’d be at least 140 to 150 years old. Seeing that his estimate was wrong, he took another good look at the elf walking in front them, regarding the back of her figure. A thought occurred to him: maybe his ten-times-of-humans idea wasn’t entirely wrong. Maybe she was actually the equivalent of a seven-year-old human.

“Yes?” asked Croire. As though she felt him staring, she turned her head toward him. It was a little concerning how she kept walking forward while looking backward. “There’s no need to worry,” she added. “I won’t bump into a wall. I don’t need to see forward to walk forward.”

“Huh. Neat trick. Color me impressed... Anyway, how old exactly is that? Like, relative to other elves.”

Croire looked at him like he was daft.

“Master is a Wanderer, so Master is a teeny tiny bit clueless about this world,” explained Frau.

Renya looked at the little fairy holding his hand. He had thought that the only ones in his party who could talk elf were Rona and him with his skill. Frau, however, turned out to speak fluent Elvish. That left Shion as the sole member who was in the dark, and her apathetic expression suggested that she had given up entirely on trying to

converse with the elf.

As for why Frau could speak Elvish, she said that it was because elves and fairies were similar beings. Apparently, elves might as well have been half-fairies.

"A Wanderer... I see. How... exotic," said Croire with an expression of genuine surprise.

"Can you not use the word 'exotic'? I'm not a circus attraction," replied an irritated Renya.

"I can understand if you're a Wanderer. Were you a regular human, I would have deemed you an ignorant imbecile."

Everything she said had thorns. She did not seem to like humans at all.

"Appearance-wise, elves mature at about forty years of age. These forty years are referred to as the growing phase. The next 160 years are referred to as the maturing phase. Only after reaching 200 years of age are elves considered adults."

"Huh. So, you're in the middle of the maturing phase."

"That is correct. The maturing phase is when we accumulate knowledge and experience. In human terms, I would be considered fourteen or fifteen years of age. You may also wish to know that while there is individual variation, our lifespans tend to be about a thousand years."

"It's also a well-known fact that elves don't experience much change in their physical appearance."

Rona chimed in from behind Renya. At first, he had no idea whether she was speaking Human or Elvish, but he managed to deduce from Croire's lack of response that it was probably Human. Only later, through repeated experiments and the help of Rona's proficiency in both languages, would he come to understand the finer nuances of his speech. If he envisioned himself speaking in Human, it was perceived as Human; if Elvish, then Elvish. This phenomenon translated to writing as well, and these newfound discoveries greatly elevated his opinion of the

skill's practicality.

"Once elves fully mature, they look the same until they die. They maintain their youthful appearance for a long time and no elves ever appear elderly, so people have at times suspected them of being immortal," Rona explained. "In actuality, though, they do age. Elf kids turn into elf adults, and then they grow older and older. They just don't turn wrinkly."

"Renya, I don't know what the blob of fat is saying, but I'd prefer for you humans to not speak secretly amongst yourselves."

"Why don't you go and learn Human if you hate being left out so much?" came Rona's caustic reply.

Croire's expression darkened a little.

*Aha*, thought Renya as he noticed the elf's reaction. Rona must have switched to Elvish just to taunt Croire. He was getting the hang of this.

"On a more immediate note..." said Rona, her eyes narrowing warily. "Why am I getting the distinct sensation that we're being watched?"

As a matter of fact, Renya felt the same. Ever since Croire had led the four of them out of the room and through the school, numerous people gawked at them from various windows and shadowed spots. The gawkers probably believed they were being subtle about it.

*They were not. It was actually rather blatant, and it was equally blatant where, or rather, whom their gazes were focused on.* Not a single line of sight made its way to Renya, Frau, or Shion. Clearly, the object of their interest had also noticed. He took a moment to appreciate how sensitive women were to being looked at. It was honestly a very faint sensation — almost imperceivable without careful attention.

"I'm feeling a lot of people staring at me. It must be the elves. I doubt there are even enough humans in the elf kingdom to provide this many eyes..." murmured Rona. "I know what they're thinking. They're probably snickering

about how fat I look. The fools, not realizing that large breasts are a sign of a loving mother, and large hips are a sign of safe births... Very well. Allow me to re-educate these poor misguided creatures. *By force.*"

Now, even Renya was gawking at her. Brainwashing elves seemed like a great way to cause some sort of interracial conflict. Before Rona, whose evil laugh sounded a little too convincing, had a chance to make good on her promise, he quickly pointed at the person standing behind her.

"Shion! Stop her!"

"Got it!"

Shion nodded and jumped on Rona just as she pulled out her scary-looking mace.

"Let-me-go!"

As the two girls wrestled, Renya whispered a question to Croire.

"These eyes on us... I assume it's that reformation movement you mentioned?"

"It pains me to admit, but..." She showed no overt displeasure, but she kept her eyes down as she nodded.

Apparently, Rona had fans. Hiding behind various places of cover scattered throughout the school, elves who had awakened to the appeal of *fullness* in women were casting furtive but passionate gazes at their newfound idol. For them, seeing a human was probably rare enough; one of Rona's proportions must have been downright exotic. It wasn't hard to imagine how they'd want to take a good long look at such a magnificent example of the feminine figure.

Of course, the appreciation only went one way.

"What are the chances they get physical?"

Renya was worried some of the more driven elves might attempt a blitzkrieg of sorts.

"I won't say none... but in that case, you won't be faulted for any action you take in response," answered Croire in a cool, detached manner. The implication was, then, if push came to shove, he could get away with manslaughter.

"In fact, I'd appreciate it if you killed a few. Kill them all if you want. The other elves might thank you for it."

"I guess the curve-loving elves are a minority?"

"For now... but unfortunately, their numbers are growing rapidly," said the elf through gritted teeth.

Renya shrugged.

"You really mean it?" he asked before glancing at the still-struggling Rona. "Because I'm just going to sic her on them if you do."

Croire followed his gaze.

"I certainly don't mind..." she said before turning back to him, "but is she quite strong? Strong enough to fight against elves in the forest?"

"Who knows? I've never fought elves before, so it's not like I can tell."

"Should her strength prove lacking, with proportions like those... Well, just be aware that incapacitation and abduction are both well within the realm of possibility."

"Uh, you know, I'd imagined elves to be fairly mellow people, what with the whole nigh-immortal thing and all... but I'm getting some pretty predatory vibes from what you said," said Renya as he reconsidered his plan to set Rona loose on them. He'd rather not come back to find a bunch of radical elves in possession of a Rona-shaped sex toy. He suspected that they wouldn't either, because they'd then discover that their kingdom, along with their entire forest, had been burnt to the ground. That last part, he didn't say out loud.

"I ask that you see it as a wave of changing opinions that's spreading through the elven population with the young elves at the center of it all," said Croire in a flat, emotionless voice. Something about it seemed insincere.

"Sure. I get the official stance. Now let's hear how *you* see it."

"It pains me to admit that elves are increasingly being infected by a virulent strain of human thought,

characteristic in its origin from the groin rather than the head."

"Okay, being human, I feel like I do need to mention that we're not all like that. I mean, I admit a lot of us are, but..."

"Of course, as a race, so long as we're making children..." Croire sighed before spitting, "It matters little to us whether it's with humans or elves."

"Won't that just make the kids mixed?"

"Mixed?"

Renya and Croire stared at each other, neither understanding what the other was asking. Enter Frau, professional explainer.

"Master, when humans and elves make babies, they're always the same race as daddy. That's why if an elf takes Miss Rona away and they love each other very much, all their babies will be elves."

The euphemism did not make her example any less disturbing.

"In that case, what if Croire and I had a baby?"

"You'll have a nice little human baby."

"What in the world are you talking about?!" exclaimed a red-faced Croire.

"It's just an example. Geez. I don't mean it for real."

"You most certainly don't. As if I'd ever... with a *human*..." muttered the flustered elf, the rest of her grumbling growing more and more indistinct.

Renya shook his head and smiled wryly. Someone's head was definitely in the gutter. Croire, however, seemed to have taken his smile to mean something else and poutingly turned away. She kept her face forward as she walked.

As Renya rushed to catch up with the sullen elf, he heard another bout of angry growls and labored breaths from behind. The struggle between the two girls yet continued.

*Maybe I shouldn't have brought them along.*

## **Epilogue: After a Discovery, Things Looked Fishy, or So It Was Told**

“In any case, I’ve been informed that the goal of your trip here is to sightsee. Is that correct?”

They were in a resting room of sorts. Croire had led them here, and upon their arrival, she had produced a number of stools and arranged them around a circular table before seating herself on one of them. On the table were cups — one for each person — filled with a cloudy white liquid. It seemed rather viscous. As soon as Rona saw it, she scowled in disgust. Croire looked at her with a mix of astonishment and contempt before turning to Renya.

“This is a drink known as yogurt, into which some honey has been mixed.” She gestured at the cup. “Please. It’s good for your health.”

Renya sat down at a stool and picked up a cup. Without pausing, he brought it to his mouth and casually took a sip. Shion and Rona stared at him in shock. Even Croire seemed surprised by his sheer lack of caution. Disregarding their incredulous looks, he gulped the liquid down. It was thick but flowed smoothly down his throat. A touch of sourness tickled his tongue, mixing with a sweetness that probably came from the honey.

“How curious,” said Croire as she brought her own cup to her mouth, “I had expected to see some more resistance.”

“I assumed elves were not above basic manners. Like, you know, not serving your guests something vomit-inducing as soon as they arrive.”

Renya set his cup back down on the table. The drink was quite refreshing, but it seemed ill-suited to meals.

Emboldened by his demonstration, the girls also reached for theirs.

“Now, returning to the topic at hand.”

“Hm?”

“What kind of sights do you wish to see, exactly? It may seem strange for an elf to say this, but I doubt there’s anything here that humans would find interesting to look at.”

“Good question.” Renya pondered silently before answering. “It was mostly just curiosity that brought us here, so I’d appreciate it if you could show me some stuff you can’t find in human towns. You know, rare delicacies, uncommon sights.”

While he hadn’t requested a guide, asking Croire to show them around did seem like the more efficient method. Judging by the way Rona kept shuffling uncomfortably in her seat, the reformation movement’s surveillance network was very much functional, so splitting up was not an option. Unless, of course, they wanted to go back with one fewer member than they came.

“I doubt the scenery here will excite you very much,” said Croire as she gracefully crossed her legs and held her knee with her hands. She sounded contemplative and her eyes were distant and wandering. “As for food... We have little love for meat here, so the most I can show you is probably some condiments or dishes prepared with elf beans.”

According to her, while elves were not vegetarians per se, they usually avoided eating meat. In its place, they made use of a variety of plants in developing their cuisine.

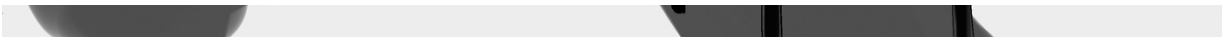
“Though they may taste foreign to the human tongue, I personally recommend our elf beans. Once crushed, they are salted and fermented, making for a delicious condiment. An equally savory juice can be wrung from them as well. When green, the beans can be boiled in salt water and served as

is. It makes for quite the tasty dish, in my opinion. Fully ripened beans can also be crushed into a powder that is perfect for making snacks.”

“...I can’t help but feel like you’re just describing soybeans to me.”

The latter parts of her description were evoking mental images of edamame and kinako powder. If he was correct in his assumption, the condiments she was talking about would be miso paste and soy sauce.





Being able to get his hands on those was no trivial matter; he would have access to all five fundamental condiments — the sa-shi-su-se-so — of Japanese cuisine. His repertoire would increase exponentially. Renya was no hater of Western cuisines, but miso-flavored fish stock with a touch of soy sauce simply spoke to his Japanese soul. Seeing the sparkles in Renya's eyes, Croire gave a conciliatory smile.

"I see that I've piqued your interest. Let's go take a look at the marketplace, then. I'll show you the city along the way."

With that, they were off.

The city was nothing like Renya had ever seen. Elves took up residence entirely within forests, and the way their architecture closely intertwined with the surrounding trees was a sight to behold. There was a dazzling variety of styles; some structures surrounded a central trunk while others joined multiple branches. Some were literally a part of a tree. It was a uniquely captivating air, far removed from the stone and gravel of human towns. Whereas humans would cut down trees and chop up the wood into more convenient shapes and sizes, elves used them as they were. Perhaps owing to their long lifespans, they were content to simply wait, slowly altering the location and direction of the trees' growth until they could be incorporated into the city whole. It reminded Renya of bonsai, except on a city-wide scale. All in all, he was glad he got to see it.

Following behind him was Shion, who was also having her first taste of elven culture. There was a sense of awe in the way she gazed at her surroundings. Frau, for her part, seemed rather uninterested. She walked listlessly beside him, one hand still clinging onto his sleeve. Finally, there was Rona, who was in no mind to enjoy the scenery. Enduring a multitude of gluttonous gazes seemed to be taking a heavy toll on her, and she looked rather

uncomfortable as she walked. None of the residents they passed were staring at her, so the perpetrators must have been in hiding. Even Renya, however, could only manage to sense their presence. Their exact location and numbers were beyond him.

"Hey..." Renya started.

"Yes?" Croire responded immediately, as if she had expected him to speak. "Is something troubling you?" Her voice was stiff. This probably wasn't something she wanted to discuss.

Regardless, the matter was one that needed to be stated out loud, so he continued.

"So, I don't know if humans are just a sensitive bunch, but where I come from, we'd call this a form of voyeurism, and it's an extremely vulgar thing to do."

"Thank you for enlightening me. I had absolutely no idea until you told me today," snapped Croire, her tone dripping with sarcasm. She tightened her fist. Then, seemingly through an extensive effort of will, she put on a neutral expression again. "Please accept my sincerest apologies regarding this issue."

"Well, don't apologize to me. It's her who has the problem... Can't you do anything about it?"

"We're all elves, and they're likely older than I am," she said. A hint of frustration leaked into her voice. "In the forest, they'll be difficult to find."

Renya grunted. Had the elves been staring at him with hostility or the intent to harm, he was sure that he would have noticed immediately. Unfortunately, not only did the elves bear no ill will toward them, they weren't even looking at him in the first place. In addition, while Rona doubtlessly didn't appreciate being showered by their unpleasantly viscous gazes, it's also true that the elves went no further than peeping from a distance. Using gracecraft to throw out a city-wide Scan seemed like overkill, and even if they managed to locate the perpetrators that way, it wasn't like

their gawking was an overt crime. Could they really fault the elves for simply looking?

He sighed. They were up against difficult opponents. In a way, he almost wished the elves would come and try to kidnap Rona. That way, he could clean them up nice and easy. Before he could ponder this line of thought further, though, Croire announced their arrival at the marketplace.

Markets in the elf kingdom were, as expected, quite different from those of human kingdoms. An abundant variety of vegetables and fruits were on display, but meat was almost nowhere to be seen. One could, however, spot a few traces of fish here and there. Apparently, meat that came from water was afforded a more lenient stance. Where there were people, there were street vendors, and this place was no different. Something was missing, though: the smoky aroma of grilled meat that he had come to associate with street stalls. In fact, almost nothing was grilled. Instead, there was an assortment of stews and soups.

"Here we are," said Croire as she pointed toward a store. "This is where you can find those condiments that intrigued you so."

The store was small. Within its narrow confines, Renya found rows of barrels, all filled with a brown paste. Shelves were lined with bottles, each of which held a dark-colored liquid. His eyes lit up. Rona's visual harassment issue could come later. Immediately, he rushed over to the products and began scrutinizing them. Both appearance and smell were as he had expected: those of miso and soy sauce. However, the taste was yet unknown, and that was a problem. Since he was in another world, it was entirely possible for him to shove a spoonful of what was ostensibly miso paste into his mouth, only to realize with horror that it tasted like chocolate.

"I'd like to taste some. Is that okay?"

As soon as he uttered the word "taste," the storekeeper's mouth twisted into an ugly grimace. Renya was well aware

that his request would not be well-received, but he still thought the storekeeper could have tempered his response; that was not a face to show customers. Nevertheless, he needed the storekeeper's approval; he could hardly just start opening bottles on his own, after all. Soy sauce, in particular, did not keep well after being unsealed. Being exposed to air would cause it to steadily lose its flavor, making it ill-suited for taste tests.

"How about just the brown paste over there then?"

If the miso tasted right, chances were that the soy sauce would as well. The ingredients might be slightly different, but a complete disaster seemed unlikely.

The storekeeper seemed no happier with the compromise until Croire approached him and whispered something. Renya couldn't hear what she said, but the storekeeper's eyes widened. He took one hard look at Renya before disappearing into the back of the store. Soon after, he reappeared with a small white rod, dipped it in the brown paste, and offered it to Renya, who took it in his hand. It was the end of some sort of vegetable, presumably meant to be eaten with the paste. Renya threw the whole thing in his mouth.

It was watery, but crunchy. As he chewed on it, its juices mixed with the salty savoriness of the beans. It might have been a bit too salty. Perhaps it was the type of miso that used more salt and sat for longer. Either way, it was definitely miso.

A wave of nostalgia threatened to bring Renya to his knees, but he kept firm; people were watching.

"Thanks," he said, nodding at the storekeeper. "I'd like some of this. What do you call it?"

"We call it miso."

Renya was shocked to find that even in a different world, miso was still miso. The storekeeper's next words, though, surprised him even more.

"We first learned of it from a Wanderer."

Apparently, one of Renya's forefathers had taught the elves how to make miso and soy sauce. The storekeeper went on to explain how originally, elf beans had always been eaten green and boiled. Then, the Wanderer appeared, showed them a variety of methods for processing the beans, and helped to spread the news, resulting in a widespread love of the new products throughout the kingdom.

"The young missus mentioned you're a Wanderer," said the storekeeper with a smile, "so I let you have a bite."

Feeling no small amount of gratitude for the great deeds of his ancestral kinsman, Renya began crunching some money-related numbers in his head. Frau, seeing him gesturing and mumbling to himself, decided to step in and take matters into her own hands.

"How much can one gold coin buy?"

"You're not from around here, are you? I've got to hold some for my regulars, and these take time to prepare so I can't sell you too much... but let's go with three barrels of miso and 2 barrels of soysos for a gold. How does that sound?"

Renya eyed the barrels. They looked like they could each hold about ten liters. It felt somewhat expensive, but he figured he'd have to just accept it as a form of otherworldly inflation. Still, it was one gold. That was a lot of money. He had to think about this.

Meanwhile, Frau pulled out a gold coin from her apron-like dress and dropped it in the storekeeper's hand.

"Deal."

"Whoa, uh... Frau?"

"Master wants to eat this. If Master wants, Frau buys. No discussion," said Frau. "No worries. Frau just needs to tweak the manastone pipeline and bump up the market portion."

The fairy proudly puffed out her chest. Renya scratched his head in submission. He had to give her credit. In terms of raising funds and managing operations, Frau handily outclassed him in every way.

Soon, barrel after barrel of beany goodness was being lugged to him from the store shelves. He began putting them into his inventory one by one. Suddenly, a dissonant sound cut through the ambient commotion of the market. He spun in the direction of the noise and listened carefully. Down the road in the distance, something heavy was running, and it was making people scream. All around him, other elves started to glance in the same direction, their expressions clouding with worry. Shion and Rona approached him. Lacking the auditory advantage of elves, they weren't sure what was going on.

"Renya, what's happening?"

"Not sure... but it sounds like there's trouble that way."

"These are hoof sounds... It's a horse," murmured Croire.

By the time she finished her sentence, Renya was already in motion. A moment later, realizing he had dashed off, Shion followed. A few leaping strides later, he saw the source of the commotion. It was indeed a horse, but something seemed strange. An elf sat astride it, arms dangling loosely at the horse's sides while the reins fluttered freely in the wind. The rider's body was pressed lifelessly against its neck. Slowly, jostled by the horse's gallop, the motionless body slid little by little to the side. Then, the elf fell.

"Renya, he's falling off!" yelled Shion as Renya stomped the ground hard, propelling him toward the airborne rider in a burst of speed. He dove past the horse, scooping up the elf before the fall could take its toll. The horse, now free from both reins and rider, continued to charge madly forward. In its path stood a figure.

It was Shion.

"Shion?!"

For a moment, he thought she was going to sumo-wrestle the horse into submission, but that seemed like an insane idea even by his standards of her. Just the sheer difference in mass meant that wouldn't end well. Instead, he saw her

deftly sidestepping the frenzied horse and grabbing the floating reins with her left hand. With a firm yank, she flipped onto the horse's back.

"Renya, this horse is in bad shape," said Shion, expertly pacifying the horse with a few simple pulls of the reins. "It's hurt all over. I don't know where it got all these wounds, but they're pretty serious."

Renya, with the elf still in tow, rushed up to take a look. The horse's intense exertion had worsened the deep gashes that covered its body. Blood flowed freely from its wounds, staining Shion's clothes. She didn't seem to mind.

"Yeah," he answered as he looked down at the unconscious elf in his arms. "Same here."

Fine features adorned a well-sculpted face. Though attractive, they also served to obscure the elf's gender. Judging from the somewhat stocky feel of the body, Renya decided the elf was probably a man. He wore leather armor atop a full suit of green. The bow on his back and the quiver dangling from his waist marked him to be an archer. All, however, were badly damaged. Piercing wounds had been inflicted in various places, from which blood still dripped. His bowstring was snapped, rendering the bow useless, and his quiver was empty.

"Hey! Wake up! What happened?"

Renya shook the unconscious elf a little and called to him. Slowly, a crack appeared between his eyelids. His parched lips stirred, barely opening wide enough to let a frail voice escape.

"Inform... the ministry..." said the elf, glazed eyes looking but not seeing. He seemed only partly conscious, unaware that he was speaking to a human.

"Wait, never mind. Stop talking. You'll die faster. I have a priest who can use restorative gracecraft with me, so we'll get you healed up first—"

"Please... eastern fort... has fallen..."

The elf kept talking as though he didn't hear Renya.

Maybe he no longer could. His fingers, infused with a desperate strength, dug into Renya's arm as he forced out a dire warning.

"They're pouring out... of the Forest Maze... It's an outbreak!"

With that, the light faded from his eyes. His hand loosened and slipped to the ground. Renya could do little but watch as the elf's head fell to the side, never to move again.

# **Interlude: The Third One - They the Pitiful and Their Aftermath, Or So It Was Told**

Caryl Valliere was a lady and a mage who resided in Kukrika, a city in the Principality of Triden. She was not just any mage, though. In fact, she was as good as they came. Widely known to be the best female mage in the city, she was young and beautiful — as attractive as she was talented.

While she might not be a statewide phenomenon, she had acquired celebrity levels of fame within the city. Equally well-known were the preposterous amounts of makeup she applied and her terrible taste in fashion, but these less flattering tidbits had a way of avoiding the ears of the person in question.

Regardless, fame and infamy had convergent effects when it came to bringing people to her door. There was never any shortage of pupils seeking her instruction in magecraft or customers with magely items for her to appraise. At times, she was even asked to craft a trinket or two. The constant supply of patrons meant that she didn't need to scramble to make ends meet; a leisurely pace of work afforded her a perfectly comfortable living.

She was scrambling now, though, her frantic motions at odds with the carefree lifestyle she was so familiar with. In fact, she was pretty sure she had never worked this hard in her life. Even her surroundings were alien. She wasn't in her office and home, but a healing hall somewhere in Kukrika, where she labored not in a medicinal ward but an adjoining

workshop.

“For the love of... Can someone tell me how things even end up like this?” she griped to the bench and stove around her. They alone adorned the featureless room in which she slaved.

She was making medicine. Brown liquid boiled in the heated cauldron before her, into which she sprinkled some fine shavings. A wooden rod stood abandoned in the cauldron, one end leaning haphazardly against the edge. She grabbed it and used it to stir. Slowly and carefully, she infused the liquid with her mana. As soon as she did, a plume of white smoke erupted from the concoction. She almost choked on the smell.

The entire room reeked, but she resisted the urge to cough. She’d rather not risk getting her spit in the cauldron or blowing away the ingredients on the workbench and having to do everything all over again. The smoke and smell weren’t mistakes; they were part of the process. She had done this many times before. Even so, she couldn’t see herself getting used to it.

Turning away from the cauldron, she stared through tear-stained eyes at her hands, trying to see if she had gotten any of the liquid on them. Once she confirmed that they were clean, she carefully wiped them.

There were, of course, specialized practitioners of medicine-making, but mages proficient at manipulating mana often took it up as a side job. Caryl was one of the latter, who’d sought the skill to make some quick cash. She’d learned how to make medicines with the intention of brewing up a few pick-me-ups or love potions from time to time. Never did she imagine that she’d one day be harnessing every ounce of her pharmaceutical talents, whipping out medicines at full throttle.

“Miss Caryl, isn’t the next batch of medicine done yet?!”

Just as Caryl was about to lose herself in her thoughts, she was yanked back into reality by the loud voice of a young

white-robed lady who stormed into the room. The lady's short hair was tucked into a plain white hat to keep it from getting in the way, revealing a face that showed the signs of extended stress and fatigue. She rushed over to Caryl's workbench and haphazardly dropped the tray she was holding onto an unoccupied spot, causing the empty bottles it held to totter precariously.

"There's a patient who's in critical condition! We need tranquilizers and healing potions! Now!"

"What do you mean critical condition?! Wasn't it supposed to prevent them from receiving fatal damage?!" exclaimed Caryl incredulously. She kept working as she did, taking the potion she just made and deftly filling each of the empty bottles on her workbench with a certain amount.

To Caryl's knowledge, mana devices installed in a fixed location had never failed to operate. Unlike magecraft employed on an individual basis, those used in devices was carefully set up and thoroughly tested. Barring physical destruction, such mana devices would always produce the intended effect. The patient in question to which the distressed and uncomfortably loud lady beside her referred had come out of a mana device. That meant the injuries the patient sustained had occurred within the device. The device was designed to prevent lethal damage from being done to anyone within its premises. Clearly, something wasn't adding up. How could the patient be in critical condition?

"The physical damage, sure. They'll live — just barely. But that mana device doesn't protect you from mental damage!"

Caryl kept stirring the liquid in the cauldron as she mulled over the facts. It still didn't make sense. The job she was currently doing had originally come as a request from the healing house, which had an exclusive partnership with the school that trained adventurers. The school's training methods erred on the rougher side of things, making it a constant source of injured students. Caryl was no stranger to

the system, and she had on various occasions done some part time work for the healing house to help treat the wounded.

This time, however, things were a little different. Normally, they'd see two or three people. Sometimes, a couple more. Currently, the healing house was dealing with over a dozen wounded. That was clearly an abnormally large number. As a result, the healing house ended up understaffed, making everyone involved a little on edge.

But that wasn't all. Even with the sudden influx of patients, the healing house shouldn't have been so overwhelmed; normally, it was inconceivable that they'd be receiving patients in critical condition.

"What the hell happened? Did the demon lord run amok at the school?" shrieked Caryl in frustration.

"No, but apparently, someone similar did," came the nurse's level reply.

For a moment, Caryl stared blankly, trying to process what she just heard. She'd meant her statement to be hyperbole. She hadn't expected it to be partially affirmed.

"Huh?!"

"Someone similar was there! It wasn't the demon lord, but there was an adventurer who was training the students and — Oh my goodness, the way he *ravaged* the poor souls! Both their bodies and their minds!"

"...Seriously?" muttered Caryl, her tone equal parts ridicule and incredulousness. "How fragile a mind do you need to have for it to be 'ravaged' when you know you can't die—"

Before she could finish, the loud cry of a nurse came from down the hall.

"A student just ran out of the ward! Get him back in here!"

Caryl shot out of the room like a bullet, shoving aside the nurse who was in her way. Having done a short stint as an adventurer before, she was more used to mayhem than the

average nurse. It also meant that in the case the fleeing patient turned violent, she'd be able to handle him. Knowing that she could help, she felt compelled to act as soon as she heard the cry of alarm. As soon as she dashed out to the hall, however, she regretted her decision.

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

With an earsplitting howl, a large male student came running down the hall, arms and legs flailing so wildly that Caryl wondered how he even managed to stay upright, much less move with such speed.

Unbeknownst to her, the student's name was Orran. His eyes were as wide as they could be, and his hair was a complete mess. Frayed strands — possibly torn by his own hand — jutted out at outlandish angles, revealing patches of bald scalp. He scratched furiously at his abused head as his zigzagged down the hall in an erratic trajectory, ricocheting from wall to wall. Each time he slammed into one, he desperately rubbed himself against its surface as though trying to escape through the wall itself.

“No! He's coming! Coming to kill me again! No more! I can't handle any more of that!”

Caryl was tempted to point out that a person could not be killed “again.” She was also curious as to who “he” was. However, some things had to come first.

“By my command, I command thee. Trails of light, form into bolts of thunder and strike my foes!”

She held back when casting it, but Thunderbolt was by nature a potent spell. It shot down the hall in a straight line at the large and unseemly figure of the male student. Upon impact, the bolt supercharged the student's already-frantic movements for a moment, causing him to break into a bizarre dance of sorts. Eventually, the spell dissipated, leaving behind a burnt smell and the now-unmoving figure of the student, wispy smoke rising from various parts of his body. Slowly, he toppled forward and fell, causing the approaching nurses to pale. Admittedly, it did look like a

corpse hitting the ground.

Figuring that solved the problem, Caryl sighed with relief. She had barely drawn her next breath when more commotion was heard from down the hall past the fallen student. This time, a whole gang of them appeared, both male and female, and all of them were in the same hysterical state. The sight of a mob of students screaming and wailing at the top of their lungs was honestly somewhat creepy. Caryl felt a pang of horror roll down her spine.

“Geez! Forget this! I’m shooting for their heads, okay?!”

“N-No! You can’t, Miss Caryl! They’re patients!”

On a direct hit to the head, even the weakest Thunderbolt could damage the brain. Lucky victims might get away with lasting physical disabilities. Those less fortunate might never wake up again. The sheer number of students and the disturbing sight they presented had convinced Caryl that there would be no end to this unless she took more drastic measures. She was immediately stopped by one of the nurses.

“Stop them without killing them please!”

“Gah! I hate this! What the hell happened at the school?!”

In her frustration, Caryl blasted the entirety of the hall with a weakened version of a quickcast Thunderbolt. A panicked dash to cover spared the nurses from injury. The fallen student and those who followed him, however, all went flying.

Once the indoor thunderstorm passed, the hall was riddled with what definitely looked like corpses. The nurses who had barely escaped a similar fate quickly emerged from their hiding spots and began carrying the unconscious students back to their rooms. Caryl followed them, walking with deep sighs toward the workshop where she had slaved moments before. Her shoulders were slumped and her steps were heavy. She had, after all, realized that the electrifying conclusion to the commotion had only increased the need

for medicines.

A story would later circulate through the rooms and halls of Kukrika's Adventurers School. It told of a male adventurer, and the entire class of students he annihilated. As it passed from ear to ear, the story would come to gain some frills here and some embellishments there, but one thing never changed. The story always ended with the same phrase: And so, it was said that those students never returned to the school again.

Few, however, would ever come to know that it was a female mage, widely known to be the best in all of Kukrika, who was partially responsible for their grisly fate.

# Afterword

Hello, everyone. Some of you, I greet for the first time. Others, I welcome back.

My name is Mine. I am the author of this story, which is serialized on the site Syosetsu. The book you are currently holding is the third in the series, so it would please me to no end if you would kindly take the first and second books as well and bring them all to the counter.

We're on a super rushed schedule this time, so first, allow me to extend my greatest thanks to the readers who read up till the last book and supported the series.

The same goes to Hobby Japan's editors, as well as the proofreaders, sales staff, and designers.

Also, to Kabocha, who continues to provide such wonderful illustrations, and project manager K, who continues to suffer my grouches over the phone, thank you very much.

Finally, I'd like to close this message by addressing my dear readers. If possible, I ask for your continued support so that I can continue to entertain you in the future.

Mine









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